I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Little Apocalypse

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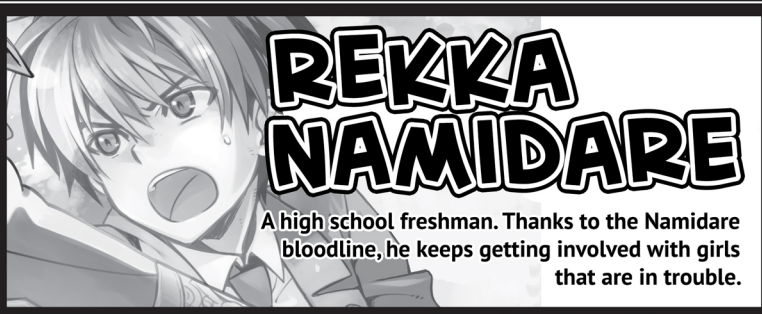
Rekka's relative,
HIBIKI BANJO
"Rekka Namidare, you need to marry me."

"Rekka."
"Rekka."
"Rekka."
"Rekka."
"Rekka."
"Sir Rekka."
...And there they all were, standing in the sun.

"I know how to use this armor's power now!"
Unafraid, I threw my next punch.

ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

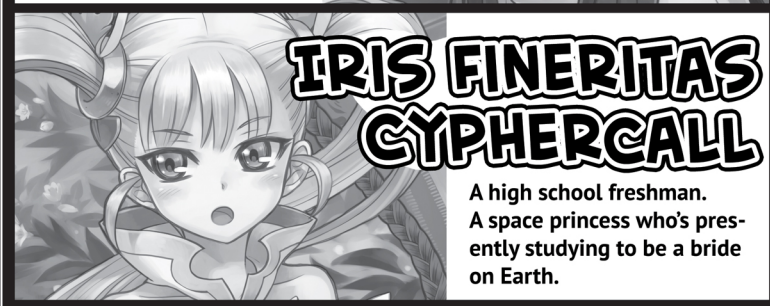


REKKA NAMIDARE

A high school freshman. Thanks to the Namidare bloodline, he keeps getting involved with girls that are in trouble.

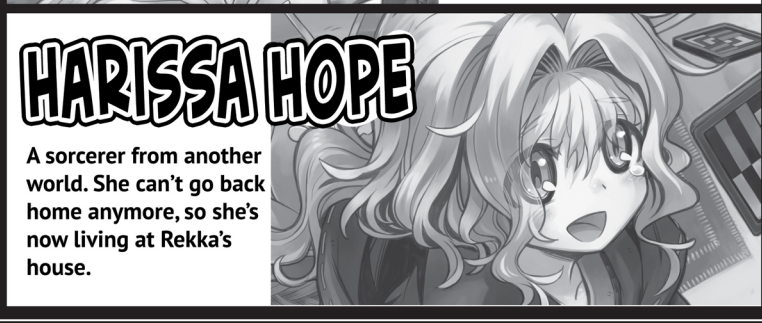
SATSUKI OTOMO

A high school freshman. She is the girl-next-door childhood friend, and heir to the Omniscient Magic.



IRIS FINERITAS CYPHERCALL

A high school freshman. A space princess who's presently studying to be a bride on Earth.



HARISSA HOPE

A sorcerer from another world. She can't go back home anymore, so she's now living at Rekka's house.

About the Characters

R

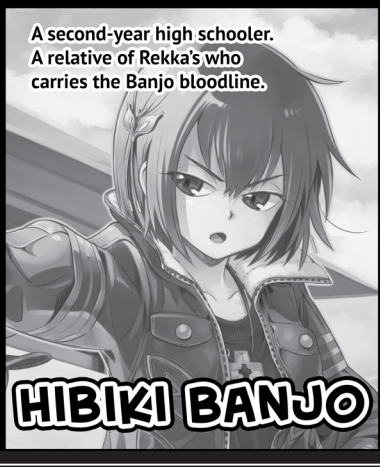
A demi-material being sent from the future in order to get Rekka together with a girl.

Daughter of the chieftain of the mole people. Came to the surface in search of help to stop a disaster from befalling the world.

TETRA METRA RETRA

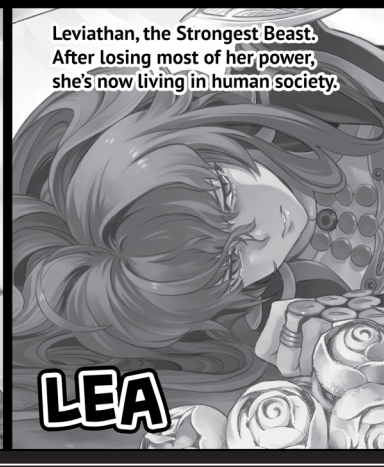
A high school freshman. Shopgirl at Nozomiya Cafeteria, her family's restaurant that's in dire straits.

TSUMIKI NOZOMUNO



A second-year high schooler. A relative of Rekka's who carries the Banjo bloodline.

HIBIKI BANJO



Leviathan, the Strongest Beast. After losing most of her power, she's now living in human society.

LEA

Prologue

"Rekka Namidare, you need to marry me."

"……Huh?"

What the hell was she talking about? I stared blankly at this girl who was standing in front of my house with her arms crossed.

Her features were chiseled and she had the muscular build of a boy, but a pair of firm breasts were pushing up against her black shirt and leather jacket. Both her jacket and her cargo pants were covered in pockets of various sizes. Each one of them was stuffed with something. She even had a pouch at her waist, too. She was really heavily equipped.

I'd thought she might be a soldier, but she had a different air about her than R. She was more like… a warrior, kinda? So why was this cool warrior girl asking me to marry her all of a sudden? Even going so far as to wait in front of my house in the evening… It didn't make any sense.

"Hmph. Didn't you hear me, Rekka Namidare?" She pointed at me with her right hand, which was clasped in a fingerless glove. "Marry me."

"Um… Listen, okay?" I wasn't sure how to react to hearing this out of the blue.

"It's perfect. Marry her, Rekka. That would complete my mission and make my life a lot easier."

Yeah, R, could you shut up for a bit? Actually, forever would be good.

I just had to ignore the blue-haired girl from the future as usual. What was going on here, anyway?

"Hey, do I know you from somewhere?"

"No, today is the first time we've met."

I was hoping that maybe there was some connection between us I was missing, but no luck. And there was no way I could get a girl I'd never met before to fall in love with me… I didn't even know if I could get a girl I *had* met before to do that.

Well, putting the sad truth aside…

"Then why do you want to marry me?"

"To change fate."

"Fate…?" All right, a new embarrassing milestone in the conversation. "Isn't this the part where you tell me that you and I were connected by fate in a past life?"

“What are you talking about? Are you stupid?”

“No, I mean... You’re telling me that you like me, right?”

Though, honestly, if she had started talking about past lives, it would have been too much even for me. But then what *was* she trying to say?

“You don’t understand what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, no. Not in the slightest.” I shook my head and shrugged.

She sighed, as if in resignation. “I’m telling you to be the hero of my story.”

Why hadn’t she just said so in the first place?! But, wait... That made even less sense than telling me to marry her.

“The hero of your story?”

The weird way she said it piqued my interest. Being the hero of a girl’s story... That sounded like my lineage was involved. It sounded as if she knew about the bloodline of the Namidare.

“R,” I whispered to the girl from the future floating in the air next to me.

“Yeah, looks like she’s a heroine.” R knew exactly what I was getting at, and answered my question before I could even ask.

So this weird girl was a heroine.

“...”

In this world, there were plenty of stories that were heading for bad endings. Maybe the hero had been lost, or maybe they’d never even existed in the first place. That’s where the Namidare bloodline came in, meaning I had a tendency to get caught up in this kind of thing.

It wasn’t new to me. I’d resolved several stories already, but they were all products of coincidence where I’d run into the heroines by chance. This was the first time someone who knew about the bloodline of the Namidare had come to me. Was that a good thing, or a bad thing?

And was the bloodline of the Namidare really something that other people knew about? Dad had sort of left that part out.

Cussing him out in my head for being so lazy, I decided to ask her directly. “Who are you?”

“My name is Hibiki. I’m the eldest daughter of the Banjo family. We’re one of the Namidares’ branch families.” The girl—Hibiki Banjo—narrowed her eyes as she spoke in a calm and proud voice. “Just like you carry the Namidare bloodline, I carry the Banjo bloodline.”

“The Banjo bloodline?”

I didn’t even know we had branch families... And what was this “Banjo bloodline” supposed to be?

“I’ve come to end this cursed blood.”

She clenched her gloved hand into a fist, squeezing so tightly that

her fingers began to turn pale. There must've been quite a story behind this... Even I could tell that much.

"So marry me, Rekka Namidare."

But I still wasn't sure where that part came in.

"Well, for now..." Sweating coldly, I gestured toward my house. "Want to come inside? It's probably best if we calm down before we talk more."

"...Yeah." Hibiki relaxed her grip and gave a slight nod, but she was glaring at me as if she was somehow unsatisfied.

"...Hahh." I sighed a little. It seemed like things were going to be even more complicated than usual this time.

Chapter 1: Namidare and Banjo, Brought Together?

I led Hibiki to the living room, then went up to my room to put away my backpack. I thought about changing, but I was too curious to hear what she had to say, so I just went back to the first floor in my school uniform.

She was still just standing there, so I motioned for her to sit on the sofa, and then brought a chair over from the dining area and took a seat across the table from her. Harissa appeared with tea for both of us.

“H-Here you are...”

Harissa seemed a little intimidated by Hibiki’s sharp gaze as she set the teacups on the table. She must have been in the middle of making dinner, because she was wearing her bunny apron. There were no walls between our living room and kitchen, so I could smell the miso soup cooking on the stove.

“Harissa, thanks for the tea. I need to talk to her for a bit, so would you mind going upstairs?”

“R-Right!”

Harissa, fidgeting next to the table, leaped up at my request and ran out of the living room, still holding the tray. Her smoky blond hair trailed behind her as she disappeared through the doorway with a clatter.

“Who’s the girl?”

“Her name’s Harissa. Some stuff happened, and now she lives with me.”

“‘Some stuff?’” Hibiki must not have liked my answer, because she started to glare at me again. “Is she a relative of yours or something?”

“Oh, no... I mean, it’s just not a story you’d normally believe.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not normal.”

“...Yeah, okay.”

I still hadn’t gotten to the bottom of this Banjo bloodline thing, but from the way she was talking, it was probably similar to what I was going through. Which meant that something a little out of the ordinary wasn’t going to faze her.

“Harissa is a sorcerer from another world, but she can’t go back home now. Since there’s no place else for her to go, I’m letting her stay here.”

“I see...” Hibiki was frowning, seemingly lost in thought.

Was something bothering her?

“So... What did you come to see me for?” Since we weren’t going to get anywhere by sitting in silence, I decided to speak up.

“To marry you, like I said.” She raised her head and spoke.

“I understand that... I mean, I don’t understand, but let’s just start from the beginning, okay? Why do you want to marry me?”

“Do you know anything about the Banjo bloodline?”

“Nope, not a thing.”

She looked upset, but I was being honest. “To make things EXTREMELY simple, I’m like a female version of you with the Namidare bloodline.”

“...Meaning you get caught up in stories too?”

“Yeah. In your case, you become the hero. In my case, I become the heroine.”

“...I see.”

I remembered the stories I’d been caught up in so far. The ultimate mage. The Demon King from another world. The monster from the age of gods. Each encounter had nearly cost me my life. A falling meteor. A cafeteria about to go out of business. A secluded village below the surface of the earth. Every story I’d been involved in had been hard. All of them had come with great responsibility.

Had she been caught up in stuff like that? Even though she was a girl?

“That’s... pretty rough, yeah.”

“Hmph. Don’t get the wrong idea, please.”

“Huh?”

Hibiki brushed back her bangs and shook her head like she was annoyed.

“I didn’t come here because I wanted sympathy. I came here to put an end to our cursed bloodlines.”

“...?”

I didn’t understand what she was getting at. I was born Rekka Namidare. I couldn’t exactly change that. It was the same way for Hibiki. So how, really, did she intend to “end” our bloodlines?

“...”

Come to think of it, she’d been awfully set on marrying me. Why was that?

“Maybe you want to get married to, uh... get a new name, or something?”

“Are you an idiot?”

Yeah, that probably wasn’t it...

“But then why marry?”

“If we get married and don’t have kids, never again will anyone

inherit Namidare or Banjo blood."

"Bwuh?!"

Kids... That felt like skipping a few steps, but maybe that was just a sign of how serious she was?

"And if we're always together, we might get caught up in the same stories."

"Um, so you're saying...?"

"For example, imagine Story A is unfolding in the town where you live, and in the town where I live, Story B is occurring at the same time. What happens then?"

"Well, then I'd be caught up in Story A, and you'd be caught up in Story B, right?"

"Probably, yeah. We're basically like magnets, and these 'stories' are drawn to us like iron filings. But what if we get married and live in the same house?"

"Well, I guess we'd both be involved in Story A."

"Right, just Story A. We'd essentially cut the number of stories in half."

"Well, that's true..."

But we'd still be getting caught up in stories, right? Well, at least I was starting to see where she was coming from.

"I still don't know if I could just get married though." That was the big problem, and the part I really didn't understand.

Hibiki's eyebrows twitched.

"What? Am I not good enough for you?"

"No, I mean I'm not even old enough to get married. And..."

"And?"

"I don't think I could marry someone if we didn't love each other."

"..."

Hibiki's eyes narrowed sharply. She seemed to get pretty miffed whenever I talked back to her.

"Listen, I understand why you hate the position you're in, but I don't know about marriage... I mean, even if you're with me, you're still going to be getting caught up in stories."

"That doesn't matter."

"Huh?"

Weren't stories precisely what she was trying to avoid? No... That wasn't it. She seemed to understand that being with me wouldn't change that part.

So was this just a strategy to reduce the total amount of stories the pair of us were caught up in? But then why was she so insistent on it? There wouldn't be anything in it for her per se.

Without thinking, I looked at her suspiciously.

“Our bloodlines hurt the innocent people around us.”

The words she spoke in answer to my unasked question made me gasp.

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said.” She bit her lip and balled her hands into fists.

“But what do you—?!” I started to ask her again, but stopped myself. I could see a red trickle of blood running down from her lip.

“...Did something happen?” There had to be some reason she felt this strongly, even when there was nothing in it for her.

“...” Hibiki didn’t answer immediately. A moment later, she wiped away the blood and looked me in the eyes. “I grew up hearing all about the bloodline of the Banjo family nonstop.”

“I see.”

I’d only heard about mine from my dad the night before I turned sixteen. Was that just a difference in how our families did things?

“I was taught how difficult it was to resolve a story, so I trained myself every single day, day after day. Weakness would only mean bad endings for the stories I was involved in, and I didn’t want that. I did my best to get stronger.”

I could tell from how built she was that she wasn’t exaggerating.

“Everyone around me thought I was weird. I trained instead of playing, and I spent the rest of my time reading books to get smarter. I never had any friends... until middle school.”

With those words, I saw a gentle light in her eyes.

“At first, she thought I was weird too. That’s why she took an interest in me. She would sit across from me as I read in the library, and just watch me silently. I tried to drive her away, but she followed me everywhere. She eventually even started coming to the dojo. I thought she was annoying, but then... Little by little, we started to talk to each other every day. When she wasn’t at school sometimes, I’d get worried. I heard she was sick. One day, she told me that she thought I was cool because I was a girl who could beat up guys... Really, the next thing I knew, we were friends.”

“...”

This should have been a nice story, but the longer I listened, the more anxious I became.

“And then I turned sixteen.”

What was it she’d said before she started talking? “Our bloodlines hurt the innocent people around us”?

“I ended up getting involved in a story where I was up against a group of gun smugglers.”

She started to look down more and more as she spoke.

“She got worried about me when I started missing class in high school. I told her there was nothing to be concerned about... But that

night, she got worried enough to come looking for me."

Her bangs hid her face so that I couldn't read her expression.

"...She got mixed up in the fight between me and the smugglers, and took a stray bullet to the stomach."

"..."

Her voice was filled with sadness and pain, and there was nothing I could do but listen.

"..."

R was sitting up straight with the same deadpan look on her face as always.

The air in the living room was frozen. The ticking of the clock seemed strangely loud.

"What happened to her...?" I worked up the courage to ask.

"She managed to survive, but she's still in the hospital. She's never woken up." Hibiki's voice was calm and indifferent.

"..."

She took a deep breath and raised her head.

"Just so we're clear, she had nothing to do with the story. She was badly hurt solely because she got involved with someone like me." Her expression returned to normal as she continued. "Rekka Namidare, I can guarantee the same thing is going to happen to you."

"...!"

The Namidare and Banjo bloodlines were the same thing at their core. Two sides of the same coin. But she was saying that someday, I would....

"No, but...!"

"We're not normal. Our very existence spreads disaster," Hibiki cut me off.

"..."

Denying it was a defensive, emotional reaction. A single glare from her was all it took to shut me up.

"So until this bloodline disappears, we should live as far away from other people as possible, Rekka Namidare." Her words were heavy because they were based in experience.

I'd had the wrong idea this whole time. I had assumed that she wanted to be rid of the Banjo and Namidare bloodlines for her own sake. But I was wrong. She just didn't want anyone getting caught up in her stories. Being with me could potentially decrease the number of stories that happened around us, reducing the chances for innocent people to be dragged into them. That was all she wanted.

"I understand what you're saying..."

And I knew that she meant it, too. That was fine. The problem was that my own feelings weren't keeping up.

Of course they weren't. Even if my legacy was a little weird, I was

still a normal person. That's how I'd thought of it... But my personal hang-ups weren't what mattered now. If my being a Namidare was going to get someone hurt...

"..."

But I couldn't just stop being who I was. My thoughts from earlier flashed through my mind again. It meant that there was no obvious solution to this problem.

Then, like Hibiki said, I should do what I could to minimize the damage. It would be better to stay away from everyone. I would just have to avoid all the people I cared about and live apart from everyone until I grew up. Even so, I knew I couldn't make a decision like that so suddenly.

"..."

But not saying anything wasn't going to solve a thing.

"..."

I opened my mouth to say something—anything—when...

SMASH! The sliding glass door in the living room shattered.

"What?!"

"—!"

I shouted in surprise, and Hibiki immediately readied herself for a fight.

"I've found you!" A man suddenly entered the room and shouted.

He was clearly after me or Hibiki. Did this mean that, just like she had planned, by being together we were both getting sucked into the same story? If it did, that would seem to confirm that staying together and constantly keeping our distance from other people would be an effective strategy.

But it was all so sudden that I wasn't ready in the slightest. Not even mentally. But the wheels of fate keep spinning whether you like it or not—and I was getting caught up in its gears.

▽

Krrsssh!

I heard the sound of splintered glass falling to the floor. A man in a white lab coat tread over the shards as he approached. No, more precisely, he wasn't touching them at all. He was wearing some sort of backpack with fire-breathing jet boosters, and using it to float right over them.

"I am Kult Graphimore, genius professor of magical science. I apologize for intruding so late at night, beings of another world." The man grinned as he spoke, light gleaming off of his super sketchy-looking monocle.

"Hello. I would appreciate it next time if you would be so gentlemanly as to use the door."

“Hrmm, yes... My apologies. I will be more careful in the future.” He was talking in a weird way, too.

Wait, did he just call us “beings from another world”? Then was this Kult guy from another world, like Harissa was? I’d never heard of “magical science” before.

More importantly, why did all these weirdos end up coming to visit me? Really, why...?

“So, yeah, what do you want with my house?”

I brushed the depressing thoughts out of my mind and grabbed the back of the chair. Whether I would throw it at him or use it as a shield depended on his next move. Since I didn’t know what he was going to do yet, I just waited.

“Hmph. What I seek is here.” Kult stroked his long moustache with a single finger.

“This is just a plain old, normal house. There’s nothing here a head case like you would want.”

“No, no, I assure you. I have a magical crystal ball that shows its bearer the location of things they desire.”

Kult pulled a spherical crystal the size of a volleyball out from his coat.

“And this dowsing pendulum shows me the way to what I seek.”

Then he produced a pendulum weighted with a blue jewel.

“With both of these, it’s impossible to hide anything from me. For instance...”

The eye that wasn’t covered by the monocle narrowed. In a low voice, he whispered something quickly. The pendulum in his hands slowly rose up, and the jewel at the end pointed toward Hibiki.

“The girl I’m looking for is right there.”

“!”

So he was after Hibiki. I still didn’t know what his endgame was, but at this point, it didn’t seem good.

“And now I will take her!”

“I won’t let you!”

I suddenly threw the chair at him.

“Aherm!”

Kult evaded the chair in mid-air. His boosters were surprisingly agile. I looked around for something else to throw, but Hibiki made her move first.

“Hyaaah!”

She closed the distance between her and Kult with remarkable speed. It was no normal run. It had to have been some kind of special martial arts movement style.

“Fuhh!”

She breathed in sharply, and then let loose with a forceful jump kick.

“Nwwoooooh?!” Kult screamed and just barely managed to dodge her. He used his boosters to move way back. Beads of nervous sweat ran down his face. “Hmph. I’m surprised to see a lady capable of moving that way.”

I was as surprised as he was. You could tell that she’d been training since she was little.

“I guess those with a great Fate Ratio aren’t easy to deal with.”

Fate Ratio? That was a weird phrase.

“I don’t know if this ‘Fate Ratio’ you’re talking about is referring to my bloodline, but...” Hibiki spoke without letting her guard down. “Don’t think for a minute that I haven’t made any preparations to deal with my cursed fate.”

She pulled something from her belt that looked like a stick. It chinked and glistened metallically as it extended to the length of a bo

staff. It was like a special kind of telescoping police baton.

How has she not gotten arrested carrying around something like that? As I wondered about something ultimately inconsequential to the situation at hand, things escalated.

"Hmph. Then I'll have to use my trump card," the magic scientist from another world said quietly.

This time, he revealed a capsule with a beard mark emblazoned on it. The capsule was tiny, but it looked like a machine composed of incredibly delicate parts. Was this Kult's trump card?

"Taste my fusion of magic and science: instant sorcery!" Kult yelled, throwing the machine capsule at Hibiki.

"...!"

She quickly tried to knock it away with her baton.

No, not that!

"Dodge!" I screamed out of some sudden intuition.

"Tch!" Hibiki heard my voice and instantly relaxed her stance, dropping to the floor.

The capsule flew over her head and landed on the chair I'd just thrown. Despite its hard-looking exterior, it broke cleanly in two upon impact. Light poured out of it, followed by thorny vines that wrapped themselves around the chair.

"What in the world?!"

The thick vines were giving off a pale light. It was like magic, but it had come out of an intricate machine.

Magic and machines... Magic and science... "Magical science"? Was this it?!

"Hibiki! Don't let any of those capsules touch you! They're probably filled with magic. They activate on contact!"

"Roger." Hibiki nodded as she stood up.

"Hmm... So you figured it out after only seeing it once? You may look dumb, but you're quite observant."

"Thanks?" I sort of joked, but I was starting to get scared.

I'd seen magic and cutting-edge space technology up close before. It gave me a leg up on figuring out what was going on, but it didn't help me at all when it came to trying to figure out a way to beat his "instant sorcery."

This was going to be surprisingly tricky. I had no way of knowing what magic was inside the capsules. This time it was a spell to bind Hibiki, but that didn't mean they would all be the same.

If he mixed in a wide-area attack spell as a feint, I didn't know if I'd be able to deal with it. And since he didn't need to chant anything, there was no opening to attack him. If only I knew what spell he was going to throw next. No, there was no way he was just going to announce it...

“Since you’ve figured out what it is, I’ll tell you. That was a binding magic capsule. For your reference, the next one will be a sleeping magic capsule.”

...Okay, maybe he would.

Did he just look smart, and he was actually a total idiot? Or maybe he was trying to show off? Either way, he was a fool. And that would make this a lot easier.

“I am a magical scientist, but I am also a gentleman. I have no intention of hurting you. So don’t worry when this hits you!”

“Then don’t attack us in the first place!”

“That’s a separate matter!” Kult yelled as he threw eight capsules.

“Wait! You’re chucking that many?!”

The handful of capsules flew in an arc toward me and Hibiki. I quickly moved from the living room to the kitchen. Without a wall between them, it was a clean break—hopefully far enough away to get me out of their range. Just as I was thinking I needed some way to fight back...

The door to the living room flew open.

“Sir Rekka!”

It was Harissa. She’d changed into her robes. She must’ve heard the loud explosion from a minute ago. She’d brought her staff, too, which probably meant she was there to help us fight.

No. That... That didn’t matter.

She’d appeared on the battlefield unprepared to protect herself, and one of Kult’s capsules landed right on her chest. It broke open, and the light poured forth as the magic activated.

“Huh?”

Even a spellcaster like Harissa was defenseless against the instantly activating magic. The strength drained from her legs. Her big, wooden staff rolled across the floor.

“Gnuh! Oop!” Kult sounded panicked.

“—!”

It was all I could do to stop myself from running up to him and sucker punching him in a fit of rage.

Calm down. Could I do what Hibiki did? No. *Then...!* I grabbed the bottle of shichimi red pepper flakes from the kitchen table, took off the lid, and flung it as hard as I could at Kult.

“Ngwah! It hurts! My eyes!” Kult was distracted by Harissa’s collapse, and he took the full brunt of the bottle. He was covering his eyes with both hands and screaming.

“Hibiki!”

Hibiki moved just as fast as I spoke. She leaped from the low table in the living room and jumped straight for him. Her right hook landed square in Kult’s blinded face.

“Gyafnuh?!” Kult hit the ground hard, bouncing two or three times before rolling straight out of the living room into the yard. “Grrr... Temporary retreat!”

He stood up, covered in dirt, and turned a purple jewel on a ring on his finger ninety degrees. It began to glow, and suddenly a blue door appeared out of thin air. He put his hand on the doorknob, then turned to us.

“Listen here! I’m making that girl mine, no matter what! Just you wait!” He then opened the door and vanished. A moment later, the door disappeared soundlessly as well.

“A teleporting item, huh?” Hibiki said in a hushed voice as she relaxed.

Finally, my home was shrouded in silence once more. It was just the three of us... and the destroyed living room.

“Harissa!” Once I was sure the danger had passed, I ran right over to the fallen girl. “Harissa! Hey, wake up!”

“...”

I held her in my arms and yelled, but she didn’t respond. She just kept breathing rhythmically, making cute little noises every time she exhaled. She was alive. At least there was that. But she wasn’t waking up.

Kult had said it was a sleep spell. Yeah, maybe she was just asleep. But if she wasn’t waking up when I was yelling in her ear... When was she going to wake up?

“Move.”

Hibiki had been looking around the part of the yard where the blue door had disappeared. Now she came back inside and took Harissa out of my arms. And then she started slapping her on the cheeks.

“Hey, wait! What are you doing?”

“If you want to know whether she’ll get up or not, this is best way.”

She slapped her two or three more times after that. There was a smacking noise as Harissa’s cheeks turned red. But still she didn’t wake up.

“Hey... Wait. You’re kidding me.” What if she was never going to wake up? “That bastard! He said he wasn’t going to hurt her!”

I glared at the yard where Kult had vanished. Of course, there was nothing there.

But I couldn’t stop myself from glaring at it anyway.

Hibiki handed Harissa back to me and stood up.

“The good news is that she’s not hurt. His goal was to take me alive... A permanent sleep spell would be the best way to do that.” Hibiki analyzed the situation dispassionately.

Harissa was alive. But she would never wake up.

That... That wasn't fair!

"Damn it!" I gritted my teeth and heard a nasty sound as part of a tooth cracked off.

Why... Why wasn't I able to protect her? I could've sent her somewhere safe before the fighting broke out, or kept her closer to me... Anything! So why hadn't I?

"Why...? Harissa..."

"It's because we were here." Hibiki looked down at me with cold eyes.

"...We can still fix this. If we see the story through, we can still save Harissa. Right?"

"...I don't know." Hibiki answered my pained question with a shrug.

But I was only pretending to talk to her. I turned to R. She was from the future and knew more about my bloodline than I did. She should know the real answer.

"To be honest, it's unknown whether or not you can save Harissa," R said bluntly. "You're caught up in Hibiki's story right now. She's the heroine. Harissa is just a side character who happened to get dragged into the middle of it, and your bloodline only gives you the chance to save people who are critical to the story. In other words, just because you resolve Hibiki's story doesn't mean you get to save Harissa too. It's just like how when Hibiki defeated the gun smugglers, her injured friend didn't suddenly get better."

What the hell...?

Harissa got involved in this because of me... And I couldn't save her?

"Well, that doesn't mean there's no way for you to save her. For example, when you defeated the Demon King and saved Harissa, of course, you saved the rest of her entire world too. So the possibility still exists that by saving Hibiki's story, you can save Harissa as well."

"..."

R's voice was flat, but it felt like she was casting the blame on me.

"You get it now, right? We're walking disasters that bring misery to everyone around us."

And Hibiki's words only made it worse.

"....."

I'd already been caught up in so many stories. Satsuki, Iris, Harissa, Tsumiki, Tetra, Lea... I'd struggled in the face of tragedy after tragedy, and somehow managed to save them all. Had I just been cocky? Had I thought that if I just worked hard enough, I could save anyone? All while unconsciously ignoring how dangerous I really was?

“I’m a walking disaster, huh...”

Maybe Hibiki was right. When I started to think about how this was all my fault, the back of my head began to hurt.

Lea, the girl I’d saved during the battle underground, had been convinced that everything was her fault too. That was why she tried to take responsibility all by herself. I told her she was wrong, but... Something terrible might happen to those close to me, and it *would* be my fault. I finally understood the terror that she’d felt.

“Zzz... Zzz...” Harissa was still snoring in my arms.

Even if I solved Hibiki’s story, it might not be enough to save her.

“...”

I had to try my hardest to stop myself from screaming. I didn’t have the right. Not after doing this to her.

What... What was I supposed to do?

“Rekka!”

Suddenly I heard someone yelling my name.

I turned around to see my childhood friend who lived next door, Satsuki Otomo, standing there out of breath. She’d realized that something was wrong at my house and come over as fast as she could.

“Rekka, what happened?”

“...”

If I asked Satsuki for help, would things work out? Maybe she could use her Magic of Omniscience to come up with a way to wake up Harissa.

But... But...

Kult would be back. He might put my childhood friend in danger too. No, he would for sure. What if he did something worse than put her to sleep? Something there was no way to recover from? If that happened, I would never be able to forgive myself.

I retracted the hand I was about to reach out to her.

“Rekka, what happened?! Answer me... Huh? Harissa?”

As she raced toward me, she realized that I was holding Harissa. Harissa simply appeared to be sleeping, but coupled with the mess that had been made of the living room, it was obvious that something was wrong.

“This is... magically-induced sleep?”

“Yeah. You can tell, Satsuki?”

“Y-Yeah. It’s a spell I’ve never seen before, though.”

“Can you fix it?”

“I’m not sure. It’s a very strong spell, so with my power, I think I’ve got about a fifty-fifty chance.”

“I see... Then take care of her.” I gave her Harissa and stood up.

“Take care of her? What are you going to do, Rekka?”

“I’m going with Hibiki to follow the guy who did this to her.”

“Hibiki...?” Satsuki appeared to finally notice Hibiki’s presence.

“...”

Hibiki, who was standing in the corner of the room, looked at Satsuki silently.

“Who is she?” Satsuki asked.

“My partner.”

“Your partner...?” Satsuki looked shocked, like she didn’t believe me.

“Anyway, I’m leaving.”

“W-Wait! You still haven’t told me what happened here. And if you’re getting caught up in something again, I’m going with you.”

“...!”

For a split second, I thought that my stomach might have literally been ripped open.

If Satsuki tried to help just like Harissa did...

If something terrible happened to her too...

And if I couldn’t do anything to stop it...

The thought alone was enough to fill me with dread.

It wasn’t like what had happened with Lea, where we all had to work together in order to beat Bahamut. I was putting Satsuki in danger just by being near her. And it was all because of the Namidare bloodline.

The only way for me to stop being Rekka Namidare was to be reborn... And since that was impossible, there was no way to solve this problem.

If there were a solution, I would’ve loved to rely on Satsuki and Lea for help. But... there just wasn’t.

So...

“Please don’t.”

“Huh?”

“I want you to look after Harissa. This time, it’ll be just me and Hibiki. So don’t come with me.”

“Why are you saying something like that? I...” Satsuki pushed back.

I knew exactly how stubborn she could be at times like these. And that was why...

“I said stay here!” I cut her off by rejecting her as strongly as I could.

“...Rekka...?”

Satsuki seemed more bewildered than discouraged by what I’d said. How long had it been since I’d raised my voice at her like that?

I didn’t know what kind of look I had on my face... And I was scared to find out. I looked away from her confused gaze.

“...Please. Just stay here. We’ll solve this story ourselves. Having

everyone come along will just make things worse."

The hesitation was swirling around in my heart. I was potentially on the verge of throwing away everything that was important to me. But it was better than destroying them. That possibility was far scarier to me than the very idea of the world ending.

"Bye."

And that's why I turned my back on Satsuki.

I walked over to Hibiki. She silently stepped away from the wall.

"Let's go, Hibiki. We don't know when Kult will come back."

"Yeah."

I left the living room with Hibiki. I was walking slowly, but what mattered was that I was going. I couldn't let any of the people I cared about stay close to someone like me. I had thought I was protecting them, but I was wrong. This was really how I needed to protect them.

I had to get away from everyone... From Satsuki.

"..."

Just once, I looked back over my shoulder. It broke my heart to see my childhood friend holding Harissa in shock.

"Sorry..." I bit down on the words of apology in my mouth, and left my home behind.

My chest was aching as I walked down the night street. The dull, throbbing pain wouldn't stop.

"..."

Even R was silent.

I ran ahead of Hibiki, down the dark streets illuminated only by streetlights. It was like I was trying to shake off the things I'd left behind.

But it still hurt.

Intermission 1

After being left behind in the Namidare household, Satsuki just sat there for a while before slowly standing up and taking Harissa back to her house next door. She went up to her room on the second floor so that her parents wouldn't notice. Satsuki put the sleeping girl in her bed, then brought over a chair from her desk and sat down next to her.

"..."

She knew that Harissa had been put to sleep with magic, but she needed to confirm that there was nothing else going on. She was silent as she began to work. It was as if her mind was somewhere else entirely as she checked Harissa's pulse and other vitals. In fact, the only reason Satsuki was functional at all was that she had work to do. Taking care of Harissa was the one thing that he had asked her to do.

"Rekka..."

She softly called the name of her childhood friend and looked down. She tried to recall the last time he'd yelled at her like that, but couldn't.

She could remember plenty of fights. She could remember him being angry because he was worried about her, like when she'd gone with Tetra Metra Retra to fight the Monster. He'd told her that it was dangerous and insisted she stay behind on the surface. But even then, he'd relented in the end.

This was the first time he'd outright rejected her. She still couldn't believe that he'd spoken to her like that. And the way he'd looked at her...

In his eyes was a mixture of sadness and anger. He was clenching his jaw so hard that Satsuki couldn't tell if he despised her or if he was terrified of her. There was a violent animosity that was a mix of those emotions, and worse.

Rekka had been her friend since she could remember, and she'd never felt that kind of hatred from him before. It was... It was like he was rejecting the whole world, and everything it had to offer. She still couldn't believe Rekka was harboring that kind of darkness inside him.

No, it would have been better if that's all it was.

Rekka was a normal person. He wasn't necessarily like other people, but he was still normal. Even he would lose control of his emotions sometimes.

But...

Satsuki had always thought that it would be her job to comfort him if he was ever forced to face catastrophe or carry some unbearable burden.

“Why...?” she couldn’t help but whisper.

Why... Why didn’t Rekka take her?

Why... Why did he take that Hibiki girl?

“...”

Had she done something to make him hate her without realizing it? Was that why he left with that girl she’d never seen before?

Is it really that much of a bother to have me around?

Satsuki tried her best not to cry. She felt like if she did, she would be letting something beat her. She didn’t want to let her heart break when she didn’t even know why Rekka had left her.

Before the tears could fall, she rubbed her wet eyes with her sleeve. Her eyes quickly turned red. They started to hurt like they were burning. But she jerked her head upwards, enduring the pain, and put the palm of her hand over Harissa’s forehead.

“Blue Wind of Purification...”

As she recited the spell, a pale blue light started to fall from her hand, gently landing on the bed like newly fallen snow. It was a spell to break curses.

The sleeping magic placed on Harissa was exceptionally strong. With Satsuki’s level of power, she would have to use a lot of her strength, and even then it might not work. There was a good chance she’d be wasting her time.

“_____.__.....______.”

But she kept up the spell anyway. She wanted something to concentrate on. Anything. Without that, her heart really would break, and there would be no stopping the tears.

Chapter 2: A World Saved by Sacrifice Faces Destruction Once More

Night. The treetops along the mountain behind the school cut off the starlight, and it was dark.

This was the place we'd chosen to battle Kult. There was no one around, there were lots of obstructions to block his capsules, and it was easy for Hibiki to set her traps.

"..."

Hibiki stayed focused on her surroundings, ready to fight Kult wherever he might appear.

"....."

I just held my breath and waited.

This was nothing new, but I wasn't in particularly good physical shape. There wasn't much I could do to help. It would be Hibiki's job to place traps and to fight Kult.

It was pathetic, but it was the same as always.

The best thing I could do was stay as quiet and still as possible to ensure her traps would work. I'd thought that would be easy, but it turned out that breathing quietly and not moving was more difficult than it sounded.

And then, after about an hour passed...

The first thing I heard was a loud noise. I only realized it was the sound of Kult's boosters after he made his entrance. He was still wearing his white lab coat.

"So there you are! I've been looking for you!" he cried in his usual pompous voice. It was pompous, but he also kind of sounded like an idiot. It was strange that way.

His dowsing pendulum was pointing straight at Hibiki. Wait... If he could tell where Hibiki was, why did he have to "look" for her?

"Looks like the most that thing can do is give him a general direction," Hibiki said.

Come to think of it, she was right. The pendulum could only point out a direction. In order to actually find her on this tree-covered mountain, he had to come down and look for her.

"Hmph. Even if that's true, it doesn't matter when I've already found you! My instant sorcery is unbeatable. I will capture you no matter what!"

"Just try it."

“Most certainly!”

Kult drew a mechanical capsule from his lab coat and threw it in a snap. The capsule flew low, aimed at her feet, and she dodged it with a backstep. It struck the root of a tree, and the ground there instantly froze over.

Wh-What the hell was that? I was so sure it would be another binding or sleeping spell that I almost screamed, quickly clasping my hands over my mouth instead.

“Tch!”

Hibiki leaped further backward to get away from the ice covering the ground. It had swallowed everything around the tree root to a height of almost thirty centimeters off the ground.

“I didn’t want to hurt you, but you keep running. So I decided to put you on ice! I’m running out of time, you see!”

He laughed and threw three more capsules. Each one cracked and shattered, instantly spreading ice over the ground and any plants it touched. The whole area was getting covered in it. If she got trapped by it, it would all be over.

“…”

Despite the tough situation, Hibiki just furrowed her brow and kept moving.

“Fwahaha! You can’t keep running forever! Give up already!” Kult must have felt sure of his victory, because he let loose a high-pitched laugh.

It was true that, at a glance, things looked bad for Hibiki.

But Kult hadn’t noticed.

Hibiki was carefully using the cover around her as she ran, and leading Kult right where she wanted him. Right where she’d set her trap. And Kult played straight into it.

Then it was my turn!

I used the sturdy knife I’d borrowed from Hibiki to cut the wire, which sent a heavy, blunt object we’d borrowed from the base of the mountain flying at Kult like a swinging pendulum.

“Wh-What?!”

A small Buddha statue ripped through the air to headbutt him.

“Bwaaah?!”

He used his boosters to get out of the way just in time, but that was only the first stage of Hibiki’s plan. The second step was for me to leap out of the trees… right down on the distracted otherworld mage’s head!

“Nooooo! You…!”

“Gweh!”

Kult’s head rammed into my stomach so hard that I thought I was going to puke. We both tumbled to the ground.

“Gaah! Get off me!”

“No way!”

I was still fighting the urge to throw up as I held on to him. I’d made Hibiki do the dangerous work of playing the decoy in order for this plan to succeed. The original idea was for me to use the knife to threaten him, but I’d dropped it when I jumped out of the tree. But still, if I could just hang in there until Hibiki got him, I would win!

“Grrr! Fine! Take this!”

Kult’s eyes still burned with rage as he raised his right arm. He was holding another instant sorcery capsule.

“!”

Was he going to hit me with it directly?! We were so close that it would surely affect him too, but there was no hesitation in his eyes.

“!!”

I instinctively closed mine. And then...

“I won’t let you!”

Hibiki flung her police baton and knocked the capsule out of his raised hand. The capsule burst and activated the magic, but only as it was flying off along with the baton.

“Nooooo!”

Kult tried to take out another capsule, but I grabbed his hand. I wasn’t going to let him try it again! Then Hibiki finally made it to us.

“Gweh!”

“Gwbah!”

For some reason, I felt a heavy combat boot on my back.

“Wh-What are you doing?”

“I’m putting my weight on you so Kult Graphimore can’t escape.”

“You don’t have to step on me too, though!”

“It’s your fault for being on top of him.”

Well, that much was true... But she could be little nicer, right?

“So, Rekka, do you think this is going to arouse interest in a new hobby?”

No way! I shouted silently at R.

But I also breathed a sigh of relief that we’d finally caught Kult. I relaxed for an instant.

“Gnnnuh... I’m not done yet!” Kult screamed and tried to knock me off of him.

He was going to use his instant sorcery again! But... his hand didn’t go for his jacket. It went for the cable reaching out of his backpack—the control for his boosters. There was a burst of flame from them as his hand hit the switch.

“Are you crazy?!”

Kult and I were dragged along the ground together. We were heading straight for statue lying there from earlier, so I quickly kicked

off the ground. It sent the two of us flying into the air.

"Let go of me!" Kult yelled.

"I can't!"

The soles of my feet were flailing a couple dozen centimeters off the ground as I clung desperately to Kult's body. If I let go now, he'd escape into the sky.

"Rekka Namidare! Don't let him go!" Hibiki yelled as she followed us.

In her hand was the knife I'd dropped just moments ago.

"Wait, are you going to stab me?!"

"Don't move!"

Hibiki dashed ahead of us, then jumped toward Kult. There was a snapping sound as the blade embedded itself into Kult's backpack.

But wait, doing that to the machine would...?!

Suddenly, a small explosion roared from the boosters, finally shaking me off of Kult.

"Ugyah!"

I fell. My jaw slammed hard into an exposed root on the ground, and I nearly bit off my own tongue. Hibiki was crazy. What would've happened if that explosion had been bigger?

"Kult Graphimore!" I heard her yell.

I turned toward the sound and saw Kult had summoned his blue door to try and escape again. Hibiki was in hot pursuit, and I quickly followed after her.

"Aaaaah!" Kult screamed as Hibiki chased him through the door.

"Rekka, run faster!"

"You don't have to tell me!"

R involuntarily moved along with me and could fly. What did she know about running?!

The strange blue door was starting to waver a little, and was gradually becoming indistinct.

"Waaah! Wait! Wait!"

I leaned forward in a sprint and raced through it. My vision blurred instantly, and I lost all sense of direction. It was similar to the time I'd used the spaceship warp, or when I'd gone through the underground seal.

But... where was this going to come out? It was a little too late for regrets, but I had them anyway. I wasn't sure if I was stuck in that weird space for a few seconds or a few minutes, but it ended abruptly.

"Gwah!"

How many times was I going to smash my face into the ground in one day? But this time, it was an actual floor rather than dirt. I rubbed my aching jaw as I stood up.

"It looks like I'm inside a building... Where is this place?"

If Kult was from another world, that other world was probably where he'd escaped to. I looked around the room. The ceilings and walls were all made of glass, like some kind of observatory. There was a staircase in the back of the room leading down.

I could see that it was light outside. It had been nighttime on Earth. Maybe it was morning or afternoon here? I turned around, and the blue door I'd just come through was... Huh?

"It's red now?"

Sure enough, the blue door had turned red.

"Maybe the entrances and exits are different?" R suggested.

Neither of us were sure, but it was probably safe to assume that the blue door and red door formed a pair.

Just as I was about to leave the room to go after Hibiki...

"What is that?"

I saw something strange. Actually, it was more weird than strange, and more bizarre than weird. It was something I just couldn't ignore.

I went over to the wall—or window, I guess—to get a better look. From the observatory, I could see what looked like a town. There were houses at regular intervals, and roads running through them like a net.

There were no big buildings. The largest houses were two stories. From the look of it, the building we were in was about three stories high.

Anywhere there wasn't a house or road was covered in greenery, including trees here and there. I could see people walking about the town, too. And if that was all I'd seen, it would've been a peaceful sight. But there was something clearly out of place.

This world had walls. And I don't mean figuratively. A literal wall stretched as far as I could see, reaching all the way up to the sky. It was like we were inside a dome. The walls emitted a faint, familiar glow.

"That looks like the light from Kult's capsule..."

"Yup," R nodded indifferently.

But the situation seemed pretty serious to me.

"Maybe Kult is ruling this world?"

From what I could see, this world looked like some kind of walled garden. That degree of planning in a city was normally impossible. That is, unless someone had designed the whole thing from scratch, like what I'd learned about Kyoto in history class... But then, who had designed it?

"...It has to be Kult, doesn't it?"

The magical science-y light from the walls was proof. This world was cut off and isolated by Kult. I just didn't know why yet.

But he had his blue doors, instant sorcery, and dowsing pendulum.... Who knew what else his magical science could do? With

all that technology, he might be able to cut off an entire part of the world.

"Earth to Rekka. How long are you going to stand there and space out?"

"I'm not spacing out. I'm just thinking."

"Well, you're free to use what little brains you have however you please, but shouldn't you be following Hibiki?"

"Wait, you're right! Where'd she go?"

If she wasn't in this room, that meant she'd gone down the stairs. R and I headed to the floor below.

I didn't know how many floors down they were yet, so I decided to start with the first one I came to.

"This floor's a lot bigger than the first, huh?"

"Maybe the observatory just pops out of it?"

"Maybe, yeah."

I began checking the rooms as I talked with R.

"It's all libraries and labs," I said.

"Well, he did say he was a magical scientist. So it makes sense, right?"

"Yeah."

I checked the next room. There were machines and papers, as well as what looked like equipment for experiments. Looking at all this weird stuff was enough to make my head hurt. But... I found something in Kult's mad scientist lab that didn't seem to fit the mad scientist vibe at all.

"A photo?"

"Oooh, she's pretty." The floating girl from the future gave a catcall.

Just like R said, there was a pretty blond woman in the picture. She was smiling softly at me from the frozen surface. No, not me, but maybe the person who'd taken the photo?

"Well, I guess Hibiki isn't on this floor."

"Must be the next one then, huh?"

I didn't need R to tell me that. I hurried downstairs.

And there I found Kult lying on the floor, with Hibiki on top of him, beating him to a pulp.

"Gyaaah! Stop! Please!"

"..."

Hibiki reluctantly lowered her fists. She was a little scary. And man, she wasn't showing him any mercy...

It had taken me a few minutes to get down here from the top floor. Had she been beating him the whole time?

"H-Hey, that's enough."

"Rekka Namidare, you're late," Hibiki turned around and

complained to me.

Her face was speckled with blood. It really was a bit chilling...

"S-Sorry. I didn't know where you were, so I searched the other floors first."

"Hmph. Did you find anything?"

"It was all labs and libraries. Nothing, really."

"Useless."

"Ugh... I'm sorry." I looked away from Hibiki's annoyed face.

"Well, whatever. I was just hearing what Kult Graphimore had to say."

"It looks like you were just beating him up."

"I'm interrogating him."

"I won't be able to talk if you keep punching me like that!" Kult screamed, half-sobbing.

"That's not interrogation. That's torture."

This time it was Hibiki's turn to look away from me.

I sighed and squatted down, then looked at Kult's bruised face.

"Um... I won't let her hit you anymore, so tell me what you're after."

"Mrrrgh..."

"I guess I have to continue the interrogation."

"Fine! Just stop hitting me!" Kult gave in to the threat and raised his hands in surrender.

I felt a little bad for the guy...

Hibiki used the wire she was carrying to bind his hands, and then Kult took us to a different room. It was particularly spacious, taking up over half of this floor of the building. The walls were lined with complicated machines and what looked like computers. The ceilings and floors were covered with magical diagrams. It was a strange room that combined magic and science.

And in the center, I saw "her."

"....."

Even when we came into the room, she didn't react at all. She was lying in a large, clear capsule with her eyes closed. She was wearing a dress, and her arms were crossed and placed over her chest like Sleeping Beauty in the fairy tale.

"This is..."

It was the woman I'd seen in the photograph in the upstairs room.

"..."

She was asleep, perfectly still. She looked just like Harissa had after she'd been hit with the sleep spell.

"Did you put her to sleep like Harissa and do something terrible to her?!" I grabbed Kult by the collar and screamed.

"I would never do that!" Kult got angry. "I would never do

anything to hurt Meifa!" His voice was huffy as he angrily denied it.

"Then what's going on? Why is she asleep?"

"She is the one girl I loved in this world... And the goddess who protected it." He gave a loving glance towards his sleeping beauty, Meifa, and spoke with a hint of sadness.

"Goddess...?" Hibiki and I both raised the same question at the same time.

For now, I knew that Kult really cared about this Meifa woman. But...

"What's this about her protecting the world?" What did that have to do with her being asleep?

Kult looked longingly at Meifa for a moment, then turned towards us and said, "Twenty years ago, our world was invaded by 'the Demon Who Eats Darkness.' His name was Zolphiakd. He was a demon who devoured 'darkness energy'—the energy that is the source of unhappiness and disaster—and used it to increase his power."

A real demon, huh? Hadn't had one of those yet...

But something seemed a little off.

“I don’t know what a ‘darkness-eating demon’ is, but if it eats the source of unhappiness and disaster, isn’t that a good thing?”

“Hah! Only a fool would—GYAH!” Kult had indignantly puffed out his chest only to get punched by Hibiki.

“Explain. Now.”

“R-Right... In the simplest terms, there is no kind of energy in this world that isn’t needed. Even darkness energy is necessary. The world is a mixture of many different types of energies.”

“So even if it’s dark, it’s still bad if it disappears?”

“Indeed. If the energy runs out, the world will be destroyed. Zolphiakd was a demon with the power to destroy an entire world on his own.”

“So what does that demon have to do with her?” Hibiki crossed her arms and tapped her fingers impatiently.

“Meifa possessed magical aptitude to match her beauty... She was the only person who could possibly seal away Zolphiakd.”

“Then she sealed him away?”

“You could say that. But not quite. Meifa had powerful potential, but she lacked my knowledge of magic. The spell to seal a demon of Zolphiakd’s power requires considerable training, and this world didn’t have that much time left.”

“...So what did you do?”

Kult’s face twisted into a bitter frown. He must have been remembering what had happened, because he took several deep, pained breaths.

“It was Meifa who made the decision.” After a long pause, he continued. “She asked me to make her the vessel for the sealing. Using magical power and a catalyst as a base, I came up with a way to synchronize the vessel with Zolphiakd’s mind, and ultimately seal it.”

“Synchronize with his mind?”

The “vessel” was probably Meifa. Did that mean he connected her to the demon’s mind?

“I see. In other words, as long as she’s asleep, the demon will continue to sleep within the seal?” Hibiki asked, and Kult nodded.

“...She chose to sleep eternally in order to protect our world.”

“Sleep eternally...”

Was that what the magic that put Harissa to sleep was originally made for?

A realization made me gasp.

“So you sacrificed the girl you loved?!”

“...That’s right.”

“But...”

“There was no other way!” Kult’s shoulders were trembling.

“I’m sorry...” I apologized for my thoughtlessness.

“...Objectively speaking, it was the only way to protect this world. It was what she wanted, too. I was weak. I didn’t have any other choice.” Kult glared at me sadly.

I gulped, overwhelmed by the depth of his feelings. He had to choose between the girl he loved and saving the world... Of course that choice had to hurt.

There’d been times when making the wrong choice would have prevented me from protecting someone I loved. And the only reason I’d made it this far was good luck.

I realized how blessed I’d been, and I suddenly had nothing to say.

“So you used that white jewel pendant to seal the demon?” Hibiki pointed to the capsule and spoke calmly.

I followed the line of her finger and saw a pendant with a white jewel embedded in it resting on the woman’s chest. There was a strange pattern at the center of the jewel, and it was flashing in time with her breathing.

“Is this another magical science item?”

“That’s right.” Kult nodded in answer to Hibiki’s question.

I looked at the white jewel again. Was there really a demon inside with the power to destroy the world...?

“As long as the jewel that functions as the catalyst doesn’t break, and Meifa doesn’t wake up for some reason, Zolphiakd will never come back to life.”

“I see.” Hibiki nodded a little... then sighed. “I thought that this might have something to do with the story, but it turns out it was just a waste of my time.”

“A... A waste of time? Hey, you can’t just say that...”

Hibiki sighed in disappointment, and I got mad at her.

“Hmph. Don’t get the wrong idea, Rekka Namidare. We didn’t come here to listen to some tear-jerker. We’re here to solve the story that’s happening right now.”

Sure, maybe this story about Meifa and the demon didn’t have anything to do with the reason Kult attacked Hibiki... But it was still mean to call it a waste of time, right? I shot her a judgmental glance without thinking.

“...Hmph.” But she just snorted and ignored me. Then she stormed over to Kult and grabbed him by the collar. “Okay, we’re done talking about stuff that doesn’t matter. Tell me why you came after me.”

“G-G-Gah! I can’t breathe!”

“Hey, knock it off,” I tried to intervene.

“Stop interrupting me. You’re making this take forever.”

Things got a little heated, and Hibiki and I yelled at each other for a minute.

"...Enough. Just tell me already," Hibiki said after she finally calmed down.

"R-Right." Kult nodded, looking a little scared. But there was a tinge of anger in his eyes, and it was directed at Hibiki.

This was bad... If their relationship deteriorated any further, we might never get the real story out of him.

Moreover, I was gradually starting to think that maybe Kult wasn't such a bad guy. I still didn't know what he was after, but maybe we could work together and find a way to solve the problem without sacrificing Hibiki.

For that to happen, though, we had to get closer...

"Before I continue, can I at least sit down? It's starting to hurt to stand up all the time."

"Stay standing," Hibiki said.

"Yeah, go ahead and sit," I said.

We gave opposite answers to Kult's request.

"..."

Hibiki glared at me, but I ignored her.

"Um, where can I find a chair?"

"Thank you. The chair is over there."

"Oh, at that desk?"

I took Kult over to a work desk that was situated between the rows of machines on the wall.

"Whew. My legs were getting numb."

"Just spill it already."

Kult sat down in the chair and sighed, and Hibiki angrily urged him to start talking.

For some reason, it felt like she was mad at me, too. I felt a little awkward.

"Indeed. Then... Oh!" Kult suddenly gasped as he looked at Meifa.

"What?!"

Hibiki turned around, and I prepared myself for the worst. But nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

"Oh, sorry. I thought Meifa moved, but I must have been imagining things."

Imagining things? Well... Whatever.

"..."

Hibiki looked even more irritated as she started to tap her foot. She was about to snap.

I gave Kult a look, trying to tell him he should start talking. And fast.

"I... I needed you to save this world." Kult seemed to take the hint and began to talk, sweating profusely as he did so.

"Huh? Wasn't this world already saved?"

“Indeed. Meifa saved this world once. But it’s now facing a second peril.”

“A second... peril?” My eyes went wide in surprise.

Hibiki seemed a little shocked too, and stopped tapping her foot.

“What do you mean?”

“Just like I said before, Zolphiakd is a demon that eats darkness energy. He himself was sealed away by Meifa, but the darkness energy he ate hasn’t come back to this world.”

“Well... I guess that makes sense.”

They’d sealed away the guy who ate it, after all.

“Are you two aware of the law that states the universe is inherently getting colder?”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“Tch...”

I cocked my head to the side, but Hibiki clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“The second law of thermodynamics. Put simply, it states that if you put a hot cup of coffee on a table and leave it alone, it will eventually cool.”

“It’s that normal?”

I tilted my head again, but this time Hibiki looked more disgusted than annoyed.

“Are you following? Getting cooler means losing heat energy.”

“Losing energy...”

“That’s right. The world gradually loses energy, even if you don’t do anything. In other words, the world is getting colder. And since Zolphiakd stole a bunch of energy from this world, that reduced the time we have before it completely freezes.”

“The ‘heat death’ of the universe, huh?”

An image of the whole world frozen solid flashed through my mind. Just thinking about it made me shiver.

“What the hell...?”

This was the world that Meifa wanted to save, and that Kult had sacrificed the woman he loved to save, right? How could it be on the verge of destruction again?

“That’s just not fair...”

A story like that was far too cruel. But Hibiki didn’t react at all.

“I understand that this world is about to meet heat death... But what does that have to do with me?” she asked calmly.

...Even after hearing that awful story, she didn’t feel a thing?

“She’s pretty stoic, huh?” R finally chimed in. She must have been thinking the same thing I was. It was hard to tell.

Kult furrowed his brow. It seemed Hibiki’s attitude rubbed him the wrong way too.

"...To save this world, I first gathered all the remaining energy and made a walled garden."

"You mean the walls of light I saw from the observatory?" I tried to keep the conversation going, hoping it would calm things down a little.

"That's right. By minimizing the size of the world, I was able to conserve enough energy inside the walled garden to sustain human life."

He made it sound easy, but wasn't that actually pretty amazing? He could sound like an idiot, but maybe he really was some kind of genius.

"But just salvaging that energy isn't enough. If left to its own devices, the world will still cool. Thus, I invented a tool to allow me to travel to other worlds so that I could find the means to save this one."

Did he mean the red and blue doors?

"I traveled through world after world, using the dowsing pendulum and crystal ball to guide me. And finally, I found something that would meet my needs. That armor." Kult nodded his head toward the other side of the room.

The room was so big that I hadn't noticed it before, but sure enough, there was full suit of plate armor across the room. It was connected to another device beside the sleeping capsule, and the gauntlets and greaves were softly shining.

"That is an improved version of the armor used by the hero of a certain world."

"A hero? But why armor?"

A hero's armor sure sounded impressive, but how was it going to help solve this world's energy crisis?

"Hmph. Let me finish." Kult looked at me as if he pitied me for some reason. "That armor has the ability to transform its wearer's Fate Ratio into power."

"'Fate Ratio'? Where have I heard that before...?"

"He said something about me having 'a great Fate Ratio' at your house, remember?" Hibiki wasn't even trying to hide her exasperation at my interruptions.

"A Fate Ratio is, in its simplest form, the weight of a person's fate. Someone whose life contains very few ups and downs will have a small Fate Ratio, whereas someone who leads a life of adventure will have a great one. Someone with a Fate Ratio sufficient to make them a hero has a great deal of power because of it."

Hmm... It made sense that someone with the Banjo bloodline like Hibiki would have a strong Fate Ratio.

"I modified this armor to allow for one's Fate Ratio to be transmuted into energy, rather than power, and return it into the

world. The name of this device is the Infinity Reviver. All I need now is for someone with a powerful enough Fate Ratio to enter the Infinity Reviver, and I'll have a perpetual energy machine that can save this world," Kult said with his eyes shining as he looked at Hibiki. "Meifa sacrificed herself to save this world. I have to protect it no matter what."

"Hmph. I see." Hibiki glared back at Kult, then glanced over at the Infinity Reviver.

If he could put her to sleep, or freeze her, and then lock her inside that machine, he'd essentially be creating a device that would supply energy to this world forever. That would successfully resolve Kult's story.

But in order for that to happen, Hibiki had to sacrifice herself.

"..."

I silently stood between them.

I mostly understood Kult's story now. I knew his motives, how he intended to achieve his goal, and his sad past.

But sacrificing Hibiki to save his story was out of the question. I had to find another way.

"Kult, I have some questions, okay?"

"...What are they?"

"That crystal ball you were talking about earlier... That lets you find what you're looking for, right? Can't you use it to search for something to save the world other than this armor?"

The Infinity Reviver wasn't necessarily the only item that could save the world. If we could find something else, we wouldn't have to sacrifice Hibiki.

"It's not impossible, but it would be difficult. The crystal ball is powerful, but its search radius is limited to a single dimension."

"A single dimension?"

"If what you're looking for is in another world—in another dimension—it won't show you anything," he explained. "Even if your world had some machine that could create infinite energy, the crystal ball couldn't detect it from here."

So trying to find an item in another world would mean actually having to go to that world... And without knowing what world it was in in the first place, it was a needle in an interdimensional haystack.

"So it was a total coincidence that you found Hibiki?"

"...Yes, I suppose you could say that."

Functionally, relying on the crystal ball to find another way to save this world would be as good as leaving it up to chance. I didn't know how long this world had left, but Kult made it sound like the situation was pretty dire. So as to whether or not there was time to rely on luck...

"..."

If I just wanted to save Harissa, I could simply threaten Kult into giving me a way to break the sleep spell... but I didn't want to abandon this world if I could help it. Yet, as always, the situation was bad and I had no idea what to do.

If I didn't act fast, I might even be caught up in the heat death of this world.

But I still didn't want to abandon anyone. I had thought Kult was our enemy, but now that I knew his story, I wanted to help him too. I wanted a happy ending for everyone.

But...

"Rekka Namidare, we've wasted enough time."

Suddenly, Hibiki interrupted my train of thought.

"I'll make this as plain as I possibly can. Give up on Kult Graphimore, and on this world."

"What?!" Kult screamed.

"Hibiki, what are you saying?"

Hibiki's words were so unexpected that I was more surprised than Kult was.

"What's important here is human lives. He's got a tool that can take people to other worlds. Using that, he can safely evacuate everyone to anywhere he chooses."

Hibiki's solution was simple, clear, and effective. Everybody in this world who survived was gathered inside Kult's walled garden. It wouldn't be that hard to move them somewhere else.

But Kult was frowning.

...Wait a second. If the solution was that simple, why hadn't Kult come up with it himself? He was the one who'd invented colored doors in the first place.

"Is there some reason you can't move to another world?"

"That would mean leaving Meifa here alone," Kult solemnly replied. "The spell used to seal Zolphiakd is a delicate one. It wouldn't withstand the dimension jump through the door. If I tried to force it, it could destroy the seal."

"I see..."

Even if the woman he loved was never going to wake up, Kult couldn't leave her behind in a doomed world that was going to be destroyed.

"Of course, I intend to move everyone out of this world before the end. I just can't leave Meifa behind while there's even a one percent chance. Even if that means I die along with this world."

The glimmer in Kult's eyes spoke to the strength of his will. I was moved by his conviction, but...

"Hmph. That's stupid."

Hibiki wasn't.

"There's a guaranteed way to save this world. Why wouldn't you do it? What if something unexpected happens and someone dies, all because you're too busy screwing around?"

"No... I mean, maybe, but at least think a little about how Kult feels."

"Which is more important? Human lives, or his stupid feelings? Are you an idiot?"

"Ouch..."

"You too, Kult Graphimore. I'm not going to let you die either. You're leaving this world with me. Soon."

Everything Hibiki said was right, and there was no way I could tell her she was wrong. But...

"What about Meifa? If we're talking about people's lives, what about hers?" I pointed to the woman in the sleeping capsule.

Hibiki frowned.

"What is it with men...? She's not waking up anyway. She can't, right? She's using herself to seal away a demon. It's better that she go to sleep with this world and never wake up again. It's more compassionate for her, and it's a good way to get rid of the darkness-eating demon for good, right?"

"Why you...!" Kult trailed off. He was staring down Hibiki, seething with rage.

"...Hibiki." I frowned at her.

"What? Did I say something that was wrong?"

Maybe she wasn't wrong, but...

"There still might be some way to save them, right? Both Meifa and this world."

"And what if someone else gets hurt because you dragged this story out unnecessarily while chasing some pipe dream? Would you take responsibility for that?"

"Gah...!" I groaned a little. She had me there.

Keeping other people from getting involved... That was what mattered most to Hibiki. It was the reason we were together now.

"We bring enough misery to the people around us already. We should always be doing whatever it takes to minimize that."

"Still... I don't think this is the best happy ending."

"The best happy ending? You know that's impossible for us to ever achieve. We can't even protect the people we love." Hibiki's past guilt oozed from her words.

I knew how she must feel, but...!

"But if we just give up, that's the end!"

"Shut up. You're only saying that because you don't want to feel guilty about what happens."

She had me there, too. And yeah, I knew it. I was just being selfish.

But... even so...

"I don't like giving up without a fight."

I refused to give in.

"Wow, sounds like you're having a rough time," came a voice from above. R was floating in the air, lying flat and looking down at us dispassionately.

Hibiki was the one to break the stalemate.

"...!"

"Gwah!"

She closed the distance in a single stride and punched me in the stomach.

"Looks like I need to teach my husband a lesson."

"Husband? Are you still talking about that?"

I dropped to my knees, sweating profusely.

"You're weak. I guess I'll train you a little while I'm at it."

"...Don't underestimate me!"

I stood up, trying my best to ignore the pain, but Hibiki knocked me back down with a leg sweep.

"Gwahh!"

"You're too weak."

Damn it! I didn't even stand a chance! Another strike came down on me mercilessly as I lay there.

"Gwah! That hurts! Those boots are steel-plated, aren't they?"

"You're imagining it."

"You're going to kill me!"

"I'm going easy on you."

"You're definitely lying! Gyah! Mgyah! Ggah! Stop! Stop it!"

I curled myself into a ball as she kicked me again and again. I couldn't even hold my own against her. There was no way I could beat her. I just had to endure while trying to talk her down.

"There's still time! We don't need to jump to conclusions! We can think about this and find a better way!"

I tasted blood in my mouth, but I kept yelling at her anyway. And the only reply I got was more wordless kicks.

Crap... I didn't expect to have to argue with her in a place like this! I needed some way to get her to rethink things—Huh?

I saw something move out of the corner of my eye.

As she lay in the capsule, there was something that looked like a black mist swirling around Meifa's chest...

"Hbwah!"

I felt a blow to the back of my head, and then I saw stars.

Ugh! I needed to concentrate on Hibiki, not some weird haze. But

there was nothing I could do...

"Lie there and think about how stupid you are for a while. I'll handle the rest."

"You...!"

I looked up at her, frustrated, but then...

Somehow Kult had undone the ties on his hands, and he was now standing up.

"Jump to the right!" I screamed out of reflex, and both Hibiki and I leaped.

Not a moment later, Kult's capsule shattered in a flash of light, freezing over where we'd just been standing.

"Fwahaha! You should never let your guard down!"

As Kult laughed, I saw what looked like a pair of nippers and a sliced-up spool of wire at his feet.

...That jerk. Had he said he wanted to sit down because he knew there were nippers in his desk drawer? And the way he'd shouted out and gasped earlier must have been to distract us while he got them out...

After he laughed, Kult glared at us angrily.

"I will not give up until the end! I made a promise to Meifa that I would protect the world she saved, no matter what! And I'll do whatever it takes!"

I realized he meant that he still intended to use Hibiki to activate the Infinity Reviver and save this world.

But I didn't want to sacrifice anyone!

"Kult! Please, wait a second!"

"Not a chance!"

No dice, huh? He didn't look like he was willing to parley.

"We're getting out of here for now. We can't beat him unless we're fighting close quarters," Hibiki said, still calm.

She was probably planning to retreat, and then catch Kult in another trap.

"All right. But we can't just run. This walled garden world is pretty small. There aren't many buildings, and they're all small. The terrain is open, too. I don't think it's a good place to set traps or ambushes."

"So even if we run, he'll catch up to us and then it's over, huh? So what do we do instead?"

"...Run back to our world. The red door on the top floor didn't disappear like the blue one did. If we go through it, we can get back to our own world. Probably."

"I guess that's our only choice."

We whispered our plans to each other.

"Now give up!" Kult shouted.

“Run!”

I gave the signal to Hibiki as Kult yelled. We turned and bolted.

“Gnuh! Wait! You can’t escape!”

I could hear Kult yelling at us from behind.

“Don’t turn around! Run as fast as you can!”

“R-Right!”

If we were going to run, we had to do it fast. And we kept going without looking back, leaping up the stairs two at a time as we went.

“W-Wait! Wait! Waaait! Gwaah!” Kult was still screaming in the distance, but he almost sounded hurt.

Oh, that’s right. Hibiki had destroyed his jetpack. He couldn’t fly now. Maybe he hadn’t had to run in a long time. He certainly didn’t look like he got much exercise.

And so we left the slowpoke magical scientist behind, and reached the third floor without trouble.

“Rekka Namidare! Open it fast!” Hibiki shouted, looking at the red door.

“R-Right!” I grabbed the doorknob and turned.

And then...

Clackety clack.

Huh? Did the doorknob make a weird noise?

“Hurry up and go in!”

“Uwah!”

Hibiki kicked me in the back, and once again I went headfirst into the weird, squished space beyond the door. The sensation of being in a pool of sticky liquid covered my whole body as I fell through to who-knew-where.

But when the feeling subsided...

“Gyah!” I landed on my face. Again.

And then Hibiki came right behind me and stepped on my back.

“Fgyah!”

“...Why are you lying on the ground?”

“Just move. You’re heavy.”

“...”

Crunch.

“Gnyah!”

Why did she have to step on me twice?! This really wasn’t my day.

I stood up and turned around just in time to see the blue door disappear. I figured they were only meant to be temporary, while the red doors were permanent. I didn’t know what the real difference was, but that seemed to be how they worked.

“...Hey, where are we?” Hibiki asked.

“Well, we’re out behind the... school?” I started to answer her, but

suddenly stopped.

I hadn't noticed because I was busy eating dirt and getting walked on, but... Why were there trees laughing at us? Why were their nuts laughing at us?

"Whoa!"

There weren't any psychotic plants like this on the mountain behind the school. What was this freaky fantasy forest? It was sufferable now that it was still light out, but once night fell, it would be seriously scary.

"Wait, why is the sun out anyway? When we went through the first door, it was nighttime on Earth."

And then something fell on Hibiki's shoulder.

Um... It was kind of gelatinous... Wait, a hairy bug?!

"Hibiki, there's something weird on your shoulder."

"Hm? KYAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Hibiki took one look at hairy jelly bug on her shoulder and let out an unearthly scream as she grabbed on to me.

She was... surprisingly soft.

"Hey! Wait!"

There was something dangerously soft being pushed up against my chest. That... That something soft was rubbing against me! And her face was close, too!

I quickly tried to shake her off, but she was holding on to me too tightly.

"H-Hey, Hibiki! Get off me!"

"It's s-slimy! It's a slimy bug! I hate both those things! Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!"

I don't think she heard me at all. She only held on tighter.

She was practically strangling me now, and things were starting to get dangerous somewhere else... I quickly knocked the hairy jelly bug off her shoulder.

Ugh... And I got a little of the green jelly goo on me.

"See? It's gone."

"It... It is?"

She still sounded on the verge of tears as she fearfully looked at her shoulder, but she sighed with relief when she saw that the bug was actually gone.

When she looked back up, her eyes met mine.

"....."

"....."

What was going on...? It was weirdly awkward.

"You sure get all the cliché events, don't you? Is that part of the bloodline of the Namidare, too?" R asked in a strangely serious tone.

I ignored her.

A moment later, Hibiki pushed me away.

“S-Sorry...” she said.

“No...”

Hibiki looked away from me. Her face was beet red. This was so different from how I’d seen her act up until now. I just scratched my cheek, unsure of how to react. But if she was scared of slimy things and bugs, that almost made her seem like a normal girl.

Anyway... So after a moment of being sidetracked, it was time to get back to business. I was reaching the limit of how long I could avoid eye contact.

I raised my head and looked around again.

“Where are we?”

The trees just kept laughing in answer to my question.

Intermission 2

When she looked at the clock, it was already past 10:00 PM. Satsuki was getting tired. She sighed a little and stopped casting her anti-curse spell.

“Zzz... Zzz...”

“...”

She’d kept the spell up for four hours now, but Harissa still showed no sign of waking up. Maybe she never would...

The idea flashed through Satsuki’s mind, but she vigorously shook her head. The sleep spell on Harissa was more powerful than she’d expected. She was starting to lose hope.

She hadn’t known Harissa that long, but Satsuki liked the little mage from another world. Just a poor girl who’d suddenly lost the ability to get home.

Right after she’d started living at Rekka’s house, she’d asked Satsuki to teach her how to do chores. She said that she wanted to help Rekka.

She had probably been good with housework to begin with. All Satsuki really had to do was teach her how to go shopping and use modern appliances. Harissa had quickly taken over all the chores in the Namidare household. It was cute to watch her doing her best to help Rekka.

Actually, Satsuki regretted teaching her how to use the kitchen a little. As a result, she’d had fewer chances to make lunch for Rekka herself. Harissa’s cooking was in the style of her home world. It had a unique flavor that was really good.

In that sense, she was one of Satsuki’s rivals for Rekka’s heart. (The fact that it was “rivals” in the plural was bad enough.) But as a person, Satsuki didn’t mind her.

It was like having a little sister, Satsuki thought. That’s why she wanted to help her no matter what.

“...Okay.”

Satsuki began casting her spell again. Once more, the blue light gathered in her hands and softly enveloped the sleeping Harissa.

“.....”

As she cast the spell, Satsuki found herself thinking of her childhood friend.

“Rekka...” She whispered the name of the absent boy.

Normally his name brought a warm light to her heart, but now it

cast a black shadow.

She knew Rekka was out there trying to save Harissa. That much she was certain of. That was the kind of boy her childhood friend was.

He could be lazy, he hated to stand out, and he never picked fights. He was a boy who loved what was normal, and hated causing a fuss. But that didn't mean that he wouldn't do it to save someone in trouble. He'd complain, and he'd say he wished that someone else would do it for him, but...

"In the end, Rekka wouldn't give up on anyone..." She said nostalgically.

Satsuki had once come across a stray cat, but her parents told her to throw it out. Rekka subsequently found her crying, and told her that he'd help find a new owner for it.

"My dad saved a cat by the river a while ago, and I helped him find someone to keep it," he'd said.

He even told her he knew all the best places to put up signs. But...

"No! I want to keep it myself!"

Satsuki had been selfish then.

In her own childish way, she'd fallen in love with the cat. At first, he'd tried to persuade her otherwise... but when he realized it wasn't working, he took her and the cat to the neighborhood shrine.

"Let's keep it here and take care of it."

"Okay!"

For a time after that, they'd visit the shrine day after day. They brought it milk to drink and blankets to keep it warm.

After a year or so, the cat grew up and wandered off somewhere. But Rekka had stayed with her until the end.

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He thought it was normal for people to be happy. And he seemed to think it was normal to try and protect that.

But... now he'd rebuffed Satsuki strongly, and hurt her as a result.

Maybe he didn't mean to. Maybe he had a good reason. Maybe Satsuki had just misunderstood what he was doing, and was getting upset for no reason. But even so...

She didn't know what to do. They'd been together ever since they were little, and this was the first time something like this had ever happened.

Because... she loved Rekka.

The slightest disturbance shook her heart to the core. Those wounds were deep.

No matter how much she thought it over—no matter how much she loved him—she couldn't understand him now. If she could, there wouldn't be a problem at all.

Not even the Magic of Omnipotence could reveal how people felt. The black uncertainty ate at her heart.

A piercing, aching pain...

"..."

Satsuki closed her eyes and tried to endure.

But the pain didn't stop.

Chapter 3: Bonds Torn Apart, Longing for Destruction

Laughing nuts. Weirdly colored bugs. Clouds dancing in a circle.

None of these things should have been possible.

“Where are we?!” Hibiki yelled.

“Don’t ask me!” I screamed back at her, actually raising my voice for once.

And we kept screaming at each other until we were panting and out of breath, and the heat suddenly drained from our heads.

“Ugh...” We both sighed at the same time.

I guess, really, we realized that screaming wouldn’t help anything. And so we tried taking another look around.

“Man, this is one weird world,” she said.

“Have you ever been to another world like this?”

“No, this is my first time in another world. What about you?”

“I’ve never been to one this weird. I went to one that was kind of medieval, though.”

I guess Kult’s walled garden world counted as one too, but this was my first time in another world that felt so... otherworldly.

But that was exactly the problem.

“Why are we here?”

“That’s what I want to know.”

“Rekka Namidare, you said that going through the red door would take us back home, right?”

“Yeah. You’d think it would take you back to the same place, right?”

“Then what is this place?”

“...No idea.”

And without a single clue, there was no way for me to tell.

“What do we do now?”

“If we wait, Kult might come to find you.”

“Hmm... It’s passive, but I guess it’s our only option. I don’t like just waiting around though. This time, he’ll come as prepared as he possibly can to capture me. We need to come up with a plan to stop him first.”

Booooom!

Just as we began to discuss what we’d do next, the ground started to shake. It felt like a giant had suddenly kicked the mountain we

were on.

"Hahahahahaha!" The nuts on the trees laughed as several of them fell to the ground.

"What was that?" Hibiki asked, but didn't wait for an answer. She plowed through the brush, covering her head as she moved.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Somewhere where I can see! I can't tell what's going on here!"

She had a point, so I followed her through the vegetation. Soon we came to a path that had been cleared through the mountain.

"If there's a path like this, that means there must be people, right?" I whispered as I looked up at the winding road.

"It might not be people," Hibiki replied.

"Huh?"

"This world is a weird place. It would make sense if there were creatures here that weren't human."

"...Maybe, yeah."

I'd prefer it if they were, though.

If we did run into something, I at least hoped it wouldn't be scary.

But then the mountain shook again, interrupting my thoughts. It was followed by a frightened murmuring from along the sides of the mountain.

"It's those nuts..."

Why were those creepy nuts acting so scared? The nuts around us started to murmur too.

...Was something coming up from below?

"This sounds bad... Let's hide!"

"I'm with you," Hibiki said.

We nodded at each other and ducked into the bushes just off the path.

And then it came up the mountain, over the tops of the tall trees.

Hiding in the bushes below, we watched as it scaled the mountain with ease. At first it only looked like a white ball, but as it got closer I could see that part of it was shining. When it got even closer, I realized it was a golden tail. Nine tails, in fact. Each of them gleaming as it bounded past on all fours.

It was...

"Was that a fox?"

It certainly looked like a fox, but I couldn't be sure. I mean, it was five times bigger than the lions at the zoo. Its fangs were big and sharp, and its enormous eyes were the size of my head.

This huge fox creature leaped up the mountain path, quickly disappearing over our heads. We watched in awe as its nine tails receded into the distance.

"Nine tails... Was that a nine-tailed fox?" Hibiki asked.

“A nine-tailed fox?” I was confused by her question.

She looked at me like I was a complete idiot.

“I have better things to do than give you the full explanation, but it’s a legendary monster that caused a lot of damage in India, China, and Japan. Of course, this might not be the same nine-tails as in our world, but it’s still probably safer to stay away.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t want to get anywhere near that thing either. “If it went up the mountain, maybe we should go down.”

“You’re right. As we walk, we can look for points to intercept Kult Graphimore.”

And then the nuts started to rustle again.

“Now what?!” I yelled. I was getting a little sick of this.

“It wasn’t a big noise like the last one. Let’s hang back and see what happens.”

“Roger.”

We both crouched down again.

What came up the mountain next was as weird as the nine-tailed fox. Maybe even weirder.

“Is that a raccoon? An otter?” I asked.

“It’s got a plate on its head. That’s definitely a kappa.”

“That one has a wheel on its face...”

“It’s a big centipede.”

“I see a running wall of rock. But it’s slow.”

“A cold, beautiful woman... A snow woman?”

This went on and on.

We watched as dozens, if not hundreds, walked by us. Most of them were monsters that didn’t seem human at all.

“Looks like this is a world for Japanese monsters, huh?” Hibiki whispered as soon as they’d all passed.

The nine-tailed fox was a Japanese monster too, supposedly, so she seemed to be onto something.

“A mountain of Japanese monsters, huh?”

I looked up at the mountain again, but this time there was a pillar of fire.

Wait. A pillar of fire?!

Then there was a loud roar, followed by shouting. I felt something familiar—the sensation of battle.

“Maybe that nine-tailed fox is fighting the other monsters?”

“Maybe. But it looked like they were chasing it...”

“What’s that pillar of fire then?” I asked.

“They’re Japanese monsters. They can probably use Japanese magic.”

“Japanese magic...?”

As soon as I asked, a giant ball of ice fell from the sky.

The battle on top of the mountain was growing fiercer. If we got caught up in that, we wouldn't last an instant.

"Should we run, Hibiki?"

"Yeah. We'll retreat and get ready to intercept Kult."

With a course of action, we quickly headed down the mountain to get out of danger.

"That cost us time. We need to hurry and set a trap," Hibiki said as we moved.

"Where?" I asked.

"We'll look for a good spot while we run. He won't fall for the same trick twice, so this time we need..."

As we talked, we came around a bend in the mountain path—just in time for a tiny little fox to jump out in front of Hibiki.

She was going too fast to stop in time.

"Uwah!"

"Yip!"

Girl and fox collided, both hollering. I heard a silly "poof" noise, and my vision was almost instantly obscured by pink smoke.

"H-Hibiki?!"

What was this pink smoke? I couldn't see what had happened.

"Damn it!"

I tried my best to fan it away from me, but it just slipped through my fingers. Suddenly, it was gone as quickly as it came.

And then I saw Hibiki lying on the ground.

"Hibiki!"

"....."

I dashed to her side, but she was silent.

"Hibiki! Hey, wake up! Hibiki!"

"...Mmm."

There finally was a tiny response as I continued to shout. I was relieved that she was okay... but then I noticed something strange.

"Mmm..."

Twitch, twitch.

As she breathed, the fox ears that had appeared on her head wiggled.

"Umm...."

Since when did Hibiki have fox ears?

"R, what's going on with those ears?"

"Cute, aren't they? I like the contrast between this and her normally cold demeanor."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's super moe."

No... I don't know how moe it can really be for someone to say it so indifferently.

As I sat there and held her, Hibiki suddenly moaned in my arms and slowly opened her eyes.

“Hibiki, are you awake?”

“...Hibiki?”

As she weakly whispered her own name, she looked down at her body and limbs. Then she went pale.

“This is... Oh no! I did it again!”

“Did what?”

What was going on here?

“Whadda I do? Whadda I do?” Hibiki seemed strangely confused as she mumbled to herself.

What in the world...?

“Hey... Hibiki?”

“Hyah!” Hibiki’s shoulders jumped as she looked up at me in fear.

Her face was dead pale. She was also shaking and starting to cry.

“It’s kind of hot, isn’t it?” R said.

“Yeah, it really is... Wait, no! It’s not!”

I threw an uppercut at R for interrupting. She dodged.

“Aahh...!”

Oh, right. Hibiki couldn’t see R. She looked terrified of the boy who’d just started shouting and punching the air.

“Waahh...”

But... she was a little too afraid, wasn’t she? I wasn’t sure how to handle this new side of hers.

“What are you talking about? Come on, Hibiki, tell me.”

“Waah... Hibiki is unconscious right now.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“My name’s Kokomo.”

“...Huh?”

I didn’t know what she meant, so I’m sure I only looked more confused. But still, somehow, I could tell...

The story had just gotten even more complicated.

Just then, there came another loud rumble from the mountaintop.

“Wow, lightning this time, huh?”

Four lightning bolts had joined together, striking the earth. Even from where I stood, I could see that they’d taken a giant chunk out of the mountain.

We needed to get away from here. Fast.

“Oh no! I need to hurry!”

But Hibiki did something I didn’t expect.

“Huh?”

Before I could actually ask what she was in a hurry about, she started to run up the mountain at top speed.

“Hey, wait!”

“I-I’m sorry, but I’m in a hurry!”

“You idiot! Weren’t we supposed to be going down the mountain?” I yelled as I followed after her.

Argh! I didn’t know what was going on anymore!

“Tell me why we’re going back up, Hibiki!”

“I told you, I’m not Hibiki! When I slammed into her, my possession magic went out of control and we combined!”

Slammed into her? Not Hibiki? Possession magic? Combined?

I thought back to how she’d run into the fox at the bend in the road. ...So was Kokomo that little fox? Was he a Japanese monster too?

“I see. So that’s what’s up with the fox ears, huh? They’re rather pretty, aren’t they?”

Sure, we’d solved the mystery of the fox ears, but R’s comments were as laid-back as ever! Especially since this Kokomo fox was about to get Hibiki caught up in a monster battle.

“Then just undo the spell and get out of Hibiki’s body!”

“I can’t undo it myself once it goes out of control!”

“Then at least stop running!”

“I can’t do that! I... I have to go! Everyone needs me! So... I’m sorry!”

Kokomo had been apologizing this whole time, but wasn’t slowing down in the slightest. I wasn’t sure if the possession magic was making Hibiki stronger or if she was just that strong to begin with, but she was sprinting up the mountain like it was nothing.

As for me, I was reaching my limit. My scores in middle school endurance running had been less than average...

“Gwah... aah... aah...! Damn it!”

But if I let them escape now, there was no telling what would happen to Hibiki’s kidnapped(?) body! I was going to follow her no matter what!

“...Damn it! What’s going on on this mountain? At least tell me that!”

The price of screaming was my breath getting caught in my lungs. I started to cough.

“My mom... The leader of the nine-tailed foxes breathed in some poison ki and went out of control! Everybody in this country knows that!”

Whatever! I’m from Earth!

I didn’t have the breath left to yell back though. I was reduced to panting. My brain felt hot and slow, and my lungs hurt so much I thought they might burst.

Wait a second... If she was “the leader of the nine-tailed foxes,” that had to mean she was the nine-tailed fox we saw before, right? I

was starting to see what was going on.

"In other words, the monsters are all trying to stop the rampaging nine-tailed fox, perhaps?" R offered, uninvited as usual.

But I agreed with her.

I roughly understood the situation, but there was still something that baffled me. And that was the reason that this Kokomo guy was heading to the battlefield.

How far up the mountain had we gotten? I looked up to check... just in time to see something big falling towards me.

"Dwaaahh!"

I dodged off the side of the path, but tripped as my foot got tangled in the brush. Whatever it was landed right behind me.

"Bwah!"

I quickly yanked my head out of a bush and turned around. My eyes met something big and bug-eyed.

"Ugyah!"

I was now face-to-face with the huge, growling nine-tailed fox!

"Grrrrr...!"

The fox easily weighed a ton, and drool was coming out of the sides of its mouth as it snarled. Its fangs were bared so high that I could see its gums. One bite from that thing would rip me in half.

"...Tch!"

It was the most literal image of death I'd ever seen.

Even after fighting Bahamut and the dragon, I still wasn't used to it. My legs started to shake as cold fear ran down my spine.

"Grrr..."

But the nine-tailed fox must have decided that I was just a coward, because it turned its gaze towards Kokomo.

"Aah! N-Nine-Tails! I'll seal you...!"

"GRRRRR!"

"AAAH!"

Kokomo screamed and fell backwards when the fox looked at him, which left Hibiki's body defenseless...

"Hibiki!"

I was moving before I knew it.

"Gah!"

A few moments later, the fox leaped for Kokomo. I was closer and had gotten a head start, but the nine-tailed fox was far faster than me. We crossed paths as I made a dive for the frozen Kokomo.

"Oww... Hey, are you okay?"

"Th-Thanks!"

"As long as you're safe. Now ru—Aah!"

I felt a pain down my back that was like scalding water, and suddenly realized my shirt felt wet. When I'd knocked Kokomo down,

the fox's claws had caught me. It wasn't a deep wound, but the pain froze me in place. My eyes met the fox's again at the worst possible time.

No...!

I'd left a fatal opening. Thoughts of death flashed through my mind.

And then a wall of flame came down from the sky, separating us from the fox. A one-eyed monster with an extremely long head appeared. The flames were coming out of its hand.

"Kokomo! What are you doing here?!" The monster must have sensed him somehow, because it looked straight at Hibiki's face when it spoke. "Seal the elder! Now!"

"R-R-Right!" Kokomo quickly answered. He then used two fingers to draw a triangle in the air in front of him, followed by an upside-down triangle overlapping it.

I knew that design from video games. It was a six-pointed star.

There was an almost invisible white flame coming out of Kokomo's fingers as they moved. Each time he traced a side, the hexagram became more and more visible. Was this the ritual needed to seal the fox?

"Grrrrr! Hisssss!"

The nine-tailed fox was now busy fending off the army of monsters that rushed it from all sides. It was functionally trapped in one place. All that was left was for Kokomo to finish the seal... or so I thought.

"Ah... aah!" Kokomo suddenly screamed.

I looked and saw that the hexagram he was drawing had become warped and distorted, like it was about to shatter.

"What are you doing, Kokomo?! Only your clan knows how to use Fumetsu magic to get rid of the poison ki!"

"I-I-I'm sorry!"

Kokomo was half-crying (with Hibiki's face) as he tried to draw the six-pointed star again. But the lines were more uneven than before. He couldn't even draw them straight.

“GRRRAOOOR!”

The huge roar the nine-tailed fox let out next made a whirlwind appear. The blades of wind knocked everyone back, both on the ground and in the air.

“Uwah!”

“Hey!”

I grabbed Kokomo as his feet left the ground, but I ended up getting blown away too.

“Oww...”

It flung me a good ten meters. I hit my head when I landed, but thanks to my grabbing her, Hibiki’s body wasn’t hurt.

“Hibi—I mean, Kokomo, are you okay?”

“Waah! I knew I couldn’t do it!”

Kokomo was blaming himself. The expression on his face that Hibiki would never make and the timid voice he spoke in that she would never use said everything. His fox ears drooped as if reflecting his feelings.

After the whirlwind had cleared away its attackers, the nine-tailed fox made another great leap and vanished off into the distance. The army of monsters followed after it, some of them throwing dirty looks our way. They were probably looking at Kokomo.

But then they were all gone as quickly as they had come, leaving only the scars of battle behind.

“And that’s done... or not, I guess.”

Just because the immediate danger had passed didn’t mean I’d actually solved anything.

“Waah! I have to go. I... I have to go!” Kokomo stood up, mumbling to himself again, and staggered off after the other monsters.

“Hold it.”

I wasn’t letting him take Hibiki’s body again.

“L-Let me go!”

“You were useless just now. What do you think you’re going to do? If I hadn’t helped you, Hibiki—the girl whose body you stole—would’ve died too.”

“W-Waaah...”

Okay, “useless” may have been a little harsh. He collapsed to the ground and started to cry. It kind of felt like I was bullying a little kid...

“Listen, just tell me what’s going on. Maybe I can help.”

“Wh-Why?”

“Well...” I told Kokomo about the bloodline of the Namidare and tried to get a better handle on the situation. “So the nine-tailed fox inhaled too much poisonous ki and went berserk, and you and the

other monsters were trying to seal it away... Is that right?"

"Yeah, that's right. But..." Kokomo fell silent.

Well, he probably didn't want to talk about how he'd failed. I could understand that, but...

"About that. Why do you have to be the one to do the seal?"

Even if he wasn't fighting directly, it seemed reckless to make a little kid face a dangerous monster like that. He'd been too scared to do anything when it came down to it.

"My mo... The nine-tailed fox can only be sealed by my Fumetsu magic."

"Huh? What's Fumetsu magic?"

"It's a bit of a long story, but..."

Fumetsu magic was evidently a type of magic used to seal—"fu"—and destroy—"metsu"—evil ki energy that caused plagues and natural disasters. The magic itself was activated with the six-pointed star Kokomo tried to use earlier. And because the poison ki had essentially possessed the nine-tailed fox, it could now be sealed with Fumetsu magic too. That's how Kokomo explained it.

"Hmm?"

"What is it?"

"Nothing..." It felt like I'd heard something about an evil energy that caused plagues and disasters before... but whatever. There were more pressing matters at hand. "Anyway, this Fumetsu stuff... How come only you can use it?"

"Fumetsu magic involves a special kind of spell that only the family of the nine-tails can use."

"The nine-tails...?"

Wait, wasn't it a nine-tailed fox that had gone crazy? What was going on here?

"The nine-tails have had the job of ruling over the other monsters and driving away the poison ki that appears in this land for generations. But... this nine-tails did it for too long."

"...And ended up going crazy, huh?" It made sense... but that raised a new question. "Wait. If you can use this Fumetsu magic, then you're..."

"...Yeah. I'm a nine-tailed fox too."

"Then..."

"The nine-tailed fox that went crazy is my mom."

...I thought so.

Before he'd combined with Hibiki, Kokomo had been in the form of a fox. The thought had crossed my mind, but that meant...

"You're trying to seal your own mom, Kokomo?" I had to ask. I couldn't believe it.

"...I can't help it. It's because I'm so weak."

“How is it your fault?”

“Poisonous ki can cause natural disasters and stuff, but it also has a bad effect on the heart... In my case, that effect is fear.”

Kokomo shook. There were tears in his eyes.

“When I try to use Fumetsu magic to get rid of the poisonous ki, I suddenly get so scared that I can’t do anything. If I fail, I might succumb to the poison ki. Maybe it’ll drive me crazy too. Maybe my limbs will just rot off... When I think about that, the spell stops working, and I run away...”

Kokomo kept shaking as he cried.

“Mom worked to get rid of the poison ki for twice as long as most nine-tails since I couldn’t do it... So because I didn’t have the courage, my mom absorbed too much poison ki and went crazy...”

“...”

You know... Why were all the stories this time so awful?

I was just a wimpy kid myself. If was told to go somewhere full of poison gas and take care of it alone, I was sure I’d run away too.

Who could blame Kokomo for being weak? His mother was probably only planning to do it until he grew up, right? What was wrong with a mother caring for her child? And now the result was this story about a kid who had to seal away his crazy mom?

Hell no.

If my bloodline was getting me involved in something like that...

“Fine. I’ll help.”

“...Help what?”

“Well, you know... Huh?”

“Rekka Namidare, what are you talking about?”

Hmm? Was it my imagination, or had her voice changed again...?

“Hibiki?”

“Who else would it be?” Hibiki looked at me suspiciously.

Evidently her mind had finally woken up from the shock of combining with Kokomo.

“Um... Where’s Kokomo then?”

“Kokomo? Who the heck is—I’m inside her.” Hibiki’s words were cut off by what I assumed were Kokomo’s.

“Hey, what’s going on here? Huh? There’s a weird voice in my head... Hey! What’s going on here, really?!”

Hmm... Both Hibiki’s mind and Kokomo’s mind were inside her body, but since they were sharing a mouth, it was getting confusing.

“Um, well, you see...” I explained everything that had happened so far to Hibiki.

“A second story...?” She said with a surprised expression.

She looked at the ground for a while.

“Sheesh... This isn’t normal at all,” she muttered to herself.

But then she looked up at me.

“It’s really a terrible story. Just awful. So, Rekka Namidare, what do you intend to do?”

“I want to save both Kult and Kokomo.”

“...I see.” For a moment, she frowned, but then she nodded. “Koko... do you have a last name? Tch, whatever. Never mind. Listen up, Kokomo. I’m about to ask you some questions. Answer inside my head.”

Hibiki closed her eyes. I watched her eyelids twitch a few times as I waited for their internal conversation to end. She eventually opened her eyes again.

“The plan was for the other monsters to weaken the nine-tailed fox, and then have Kokomo seal it.”

“I see... but...” I thought back to the monsters attacking the fox. “To be honest, they were no match for that thing.”

“I guess it’s as strong as the legends say it is. According to the stories, it destroyed three countries.” Hibiki nodded. “But this Fumetsu magic is very powerful. There’s a reason only the nine-tails can use it. I think my role is to work together with Kokomo until he can master the spell.”

In manga and light novels, it was common for two people to get combined in an accident and have to work together to fight something.

“But still... he has to seal away his own mother?”

“Rekka Namidare, are you really going to make me go through this again?”

By “again,” she was probably referring to our fight in Kult’s lab. If I hesitated to help seal away the fox, the damage might get worse... That must have been what she wanted to say.

I mean, maybe I was just being idealistic, but... If somebody is crying at the end, it’s not a happy ending, is it?

“...Um, I’m okay.” Kokomo slowly and hesitatingly spoke to me through Hibiki’s mouth.

“But...”

“Fumetsu magic can both seal and destroy poison ki, although normally you just use the destruction spell. That’s the obvious choice. But when the poison ki is so strong that even a nine-tailed fox can’t destroy it, you use the sealing technique. And then you just let the poison ki slowly dissipate inside the seal.”

“Dissipate?”

“It gradually becomes harmless,” said Kokomo.

So that meant...

“If the sealing works, I can save my mom... It’ll take about a thousand years though,” he explained.

“I see.”

I was glad that he could save her, but wasn’t a thousand years a little too long? I mean, Kokomo was still a kid. Didn’t he still want to have his mother around...? Or maybe this was his way of proving he could stand on his own. The nine-tails were the rulers of the monsters, so the next one should be Kokomo. Was he deliberately taking on the job of sealing her, trying to shoulder that burden? No, but...

“Hey, Kokomo—”

“That’s all we need to know, right? So don’t use my mouth without permission anymore, Kokomo.”

Just as I was about to ask what he was really after, Hibiki cut me off.

“Wait. One more thing...”

Except before I could ask this time, I was interrupted by the familiar roaring sound of a jetpack overhead.

“I finally caught up to you!”

And with the jetpack came a voice I recognized.

That’s right. We’d been running away, hadn’t we? I turned around and looked up at the sky. Kult, the magical scientist from another world, had followed us.

▽

“Wait, is your jetpack bigger than before?”

“Fwahahaha! I am a genius, and I don’t make the same mistake twice! If I’m higher up than you can reach, I don’t have to worry about you counterattacking!”

The way he laughed made him sound like an idiot, but it was a good strategy.

In fact, Kult’s jetpack was about five times the size of the last one. It was more like a flying mechanical chair. And with it, he was over our heads and out of our reach.

“Hibiki, you don’t by any chance have a gun or anything, do you?”

“Nope.”

“Just checking.”

Well, this was no good. We had no way of attacking him like this.

“Wh-Who’s that? Kokomo, don’t use my mouth! I-I’m sorry!” Kokomo didn’t know who Kult was, so he tried to ask, but Hibiki angrily cut him off. With it all coming out of Hibiki’s mouth, it sounded like a comedy routine.

But leaving that aside, how were we supposed to get out of this?

No, wait. Last time was an unfortunate misunderstanding, but I didn’t really want to be Kult’s enemy. If I could persuade him now...

“Hey, Kult! Listen to me!”

“Haha! Begging for your life, are you? Well, it won’t work!”

“No, that’s not it…”

“There will be no mercy! Behold my latest invention!” Kult shouted.

As he pressed a button on the armrest of his flying chair, it instantly began to transform.

“Wait… What the heck?”

“Gwahaha! Did you see that?”

I stared in shock at Kult’s transformed invention.

It was like… It was like a personal flying battleship… or something. Kult’s body was still exposed like before, but dangerous looking weapons were poking out of the chair. I saw what looked like eight Gatling guns.

And here we were… We didn’t even have a shield, let alone a gun. This was way more than we could handle.

“Now, witness the power of my Battle Kult Ship!” As he spoke, all of the Gatling guns pointed towards us.

Crap!

“Run into the forest!”

“Take this!”

Kult and I shouted at the same time. His Gatling guns opened fire, freezing the whole area around us.

“They’re shooting instant sorcery capsules?!”

This was a lot more dangerous than Kult’s crappy pitching. The trees of the forest we ran into were being frozen at an alarming rate. The leaves and branches blocked the capsules for the first two or three seconds, but the Battle Kult Ship plowed straight through the frozen limbs like an icebreaker, shattering them as it went.

“Gyaaah! Aaah! Aaah!”

The nuts in the trees screamed as their comrades were frozen. Their chorus of terror sounded like the prelude to the end of the world. My eardrums felt like they were about to burst.

“I knew it! You punched him too much, and now he won’t listen to us!”

“Shut up! For now, think of a way to get us out of this!”

“Good point!”

I had three choices. One: Destroy the Battle Kult Ship, or maybe just the eight Gatling guns. Two: Escape successfully. Three: Suddenly gain the abilities of the world’s greatest conman, and then talk Kult down.

Any one of them would require a miracle.

For the first one, I didn’t even know how I would go about doing it. So, for the time being, what we really needed to do was flee. But how do you escape from somebody who can fly?

“Aah, damn it! I’ve got nothing! Hibiki, do you have any ideas?”

“...I’ve got one more police baton hidden in my jacket. The only thing I can think of is to fling it at him and hit him in the head.”

“Will that work?!”

“I’m good at throwing things!” she yelled back.

Come to think of it, she’d knocked a capsule straight out of Kult’s hand before on the mountain behind the school.

“But do you have time to throw it?”

“If you’re willing to be a decoy, but...”

One of us would be a decoy while the other took him by surprise. It was a pretty typical plan. But it wasn’t going to work. Because...

“Kult’s after me, after all.”

She was right. Even if we split up, Kult would follow her. In other words, I couldn’t be a decoy.

“Damn it! We’ve got nothing! Kokomo, do you have any ideas?!”

“H-Huh?” Kokomo gave a surprised gasp. He hadn’t expected to suddenly be included in the conversation. Hibiki looked upset at this reaction, but given the situation, she didn’t complain.

“I’m sorry to get you caught up in our problems, but if we get taken out here, you’re finished too! Do you have a spell or something you can use?”

“I... I only know how to use the most basic one...”

Kokomo didn’t sound very confident, but I listened to what he had to say with every ounce of attention I could spare. This would be our ticket out of this mess!

▽

“Hahh... hahh...”

I was running out of breath already. I needed to finish this before I couldn’t move anymore!

“Hibiki! Kokomo! Let’s do it!” I yelled.

Hibiki took a small, palm-sized tube out of one of the many pockets of her cargo pants.

“Don’t breathe in too much of the smoke!” she shouted as she pulled the pin to the tube. Instantly, we were surrounded by smoke.

“Wh-What?!” I heard Kult yell as the sound of the Gatling guns stopped.

“Rekka!” Then I heard Kokomo’s voice as he used Hibiki’s hands to touch my chest.

...Hmm? Was that right? I couldn’t tell.

“Is the spell working on me?”

“Yup. It’s fine!”

“Okay, got it!”

That was the signal.

I took a quick breath to avoid inhaling too much smoke, picked a direction, and ran as fast as I could.

"Huh?!"

Kult reacted when he saw me leap out of the smoke. He was probably checking to see if I was Hibiki.

"There you are!"

And then he pointed his guns at me.

"...!"

I ran as fast as my legs would carry me away from the exploding ice magic, smiling to myself.

"Ooh. Your ugly smile actually looks good on Hibiki's face, huh?" R said.

"Shut up!" I kept running, doing my best to ignore her.

Kokomo had put a spell on me to alter my appearance. Apparently it was something that all foxes and raccoons could do, and he'd used it to make me look like Hibiki. Because of that, I was able to distract Kult after all.

Just then, Hibiki's police baton came flying out of the dispersing smoke in a beeline for the back of Kult's head. But just before it hit him...

"Nwah?!"

Some kind of sixth sense must have saved him, because Kult saw the incoming baton and raised his left hand to block it.

KA-CHINK! There was a metallic noise as the baton rebounded and fell to the ground instead of hitting him in the head.

"Did we fail?"

I grabbed on to a nearby tree trunk and came to a sudden stop.

This was bad. At this point, I at least had to get Hibiki and Kokomo out of here... I turned around and deliberately charged towards Kult.

But for some reason, so did Hibiki.

"?!"

At this rate, we'd both be caught! Hibiki knew that one of us was supposed to be the decoy, so what was she thinking? I had no idea what she was trying to do.

"Gaah! Which of you is the real one?"

But Kult was confused too.

The Battle Kult Ship only had Gatling guns on the front in order to concentrate its firepower. And since he couldn't fire on us both, it looked like he couldn't decide which "Hibiki" to attack. So...

"Rekka Namidare! You run!" I yelled in Hibiki's voice.

Kult! You're a genius, so you should figure it out!

If one of the two Hibikis calls the other "Rekka Namidare," who's who?

“So you’re the real one!”

That’s right! Aim at me!

I succeeded in tricking Kult, then turned around to run again. Now all I needed was for the real Hibiki to get as far away as possible…

“No! Come after me!”

Aww, damn it!

I looked behind me as I ran. Hibiki had picked up something from the ground and was holding it high for me to see.

“That’s…! That’s it!”

I changed direction yet again. It felt like I’d been doing that a lot. My ankles were screaming, but I headed for Hibiki while keeping away from the Gatling guns as best I could.

“Wait!” Kult yelled as he followed us in his flying battleship.

But this was the last spurt. I moved my arms and legs as fast as I could, forgetting even to breathe.

And at last, Hibiki was in front of me.

She turned the jewel on what she’d been holding—the ring Kult wore on left hand—and summoned the blue door that led to another world.

“Geh! That’s…!” Kult quickly stopped firing when he saw the blue door. He was probably worried about freezing the ring. “Y-You! When did you get my ring?!”

“You blocked my baton with your left hand, didn’t you? It fell off then.”

So the metallic sound I’d heard was her baton hitting the ring?

“Ngah! G-Give that back!”

“You want it back…?” Hibiki held it high.

“Then go get it!” She hurled the ring as far away as she could.

“Gyaaaaah!” Kult’s screaming grew even louder.

Without that ring, he couldn’t get home.

“Okay, now go!”

“Right!”

While Kult was chasing the ring, Hibiki put her hand on the blue door.

Clackety clack.

“Hmm?”

Hadn’t I heard that noise when I opened the red door? I looked at the doorknob.

“Wait! S-Stop!”

I had an absolutely terrible premonition and tried to stop Hibiki.

“Stop wasting time! The door’s going to disappear!”

But she ignored my hesitation and yanked me through the blue door with her.

Right after, my vision went black.

▽

I woke up just in time to look up and see the blue door disappear.

"My back hurts..."

I must've hit it coming through the door.

"Rekka Namidare, are you okay?"

"Hmm? Yeah... Ow."

Hibiki helped me up. How come she always landed on her feet? I really should've had her teach me the trick.

"...Are you really okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"But that wound on your back..."

Oh, she must have meant where the nine-tailed fox got me.

"It's not that deep. And it's already stopped bleeding. I'm fine."

"....." Hibiki fell silent as she looked at my back. "Is that from when you protected me?"

"Hmm? Weren't you still unconscious then?"

"Kokomo just told me."

That's right. They could talk inside her head, couldn't they?

"Well, just like I said, it's not that bad. Don't worry about it."

"...Hmph." For some reason, Hibiki turned away from me.

...Had I said something to piss her off again?

I had Kokomo undo the transformation spell. I felt much more at ease in my own body. There were a lot of things different about a girl's body... Like, um, the breasts and... stuff... No, never mind.

Anyway...

"Moving on..."

"Yeah..."

Hibiki and I both sighed and looked around.

We were in a wasteland. One without so much as a single tree. The land was barren as far as the eye could see.

"Just like I thought, we're somewhere different now... Is this Earth? Or another world?" Hibiki whispered to herself.

"Yeah, about that..." I raised my hand in response to Hibiki's whisper.

"What?"

"I just realized that there's a dial on that doorknob."

"A dial?"

"Yup. One you can spin."

"Come to think of it, it did feel like I was spinning something when I turned the doorknob."

"That dial is probably what decides where the door goes. I accidentally spun it when I opened the red door in Kult's lab, too."

"....."

"Wh-What?" I asked.

"Great. In other words, if you hadn't spun that dial, we could've made it back without getting caught up in this unnecessary story."

She looked like she was ready to kill me. But it wasn't fair. She hadn't noticed it either!

Well, whatever. I guess it was still my fault.

"...Hmph." Hibiki's shoulders slumped. "There's no point in just sitting around in an empty wasteland like this. Let's go, Rekka Namidare."

"Mm, yeah..."

"Huh? What's wrong? Is there something on my face?"

"No... I mean, I know it's a little late for this, but isn't it kind of a pain to call me by my full name?"

"....."

Maybe it was a little too late, yeah. She looked at me like I was hopeless.

"...rassing, right?"

"Huh?"

"It's embarrassing to call a boy by his first name."

This time it was my turn to look astonished.

"Wh-What?! Why are you looking at me like I'm weird?" She stammered.

"I'm not, really..."

Come to think of it, she'd called Kult by his full name, and she'd even asked Kokomo if he had a last name.

"Do you not like men?"

"That's not it," she said. "I just never really had a chance to interact with any... Wait, what are you making me say?!"

"Gwah!"

She... She punched me dead in the solar plexus... That might've been the worst hit I took all day.

But while we were screwing around, the fox ears on Hibiki's head suddenly twitched.

"U-Um, guys... I told you stop talking out of my mouth!"

Kokomo tried to say something, but Hibiki cut him off.

"ROAAAAARRRRRRR!"

It was just in time for an earthshaking roar to drown out all of our voices.

"Wh-What?!"

It sounded like someone's voice... maybe. The way it shook my eardrums and pounded into my brain made it hard to believe somebody was making that noise, but it definitely sounded human.

"It's coming from over there!" Hibiki yelled.

When I turned in the direction she was pointing, I saw a huge army headed our way. There was a massive group of armed men coming over the horizon... but something was strange about their silhouettes.

“Golden... humanoids?”

They looked like the stick figures you see on emergency exit signs, except a little squished and wider on the sides... They looked like they were made of clay. And each of these golden claymen were holding weapons like spears, bows, swords, and shields as they rushed towards us.

“There are more coming from the other side too!”

I spun around and saw another army of claymen coming up from behind us, just like she said. These ones were white. There were less of them than the golden claymen, but they were holding weapons and screaming too.

No matter how dense I was, even I could tell what was happening... Rather, what was about to happen.

“A war...?”

It was a simple word. It was almost surreal to say it out loud, but that’s what this was. It was happening right in front of me.

“What are you doing? We need to get out of here!”

Hibiki grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me.

“R-Right!”

We ran away from the battlefield as fast as we could.

▽

After just barely escaping the clayman armies, we wandered through the wasteland for hours.

“Hahh... Hahh...”

It was scorching hot, and the sun was burning my skin. Without any shade and without any water, we were running out of energy quickly. Even Hibiki was staggering.

I wanted to take a break, but if Kult managed to find us in a wide-open plain like this, we’d be sitting ducks. We couldn’t afford to stay put.

“...How long do you think it will be before Kult gets here?” I asked Hibiki once I couldn’t walk anymore.

“He’s got the dowsing pendulum, so he should be able to find the ring. He’ll be here eventually.”

“So it’s just a matter of time.”

“Shut up.”

The conversation stopped there.

It was strange, but part of me was looking forward to Kult showing up. If he showed up now, we’d have no way to beat him, but

at least I wouldn't have to walk anymore.

Both Hibiki and I were reaching our mental limits. When you start to get that fatigued, your mind goes in dark directions. For example, I started thinking about my bloodline.

The bloodline of the Namidare caused its bearer to get caught up in stories without a hero, and forced them to play the role of protagonist. At first, I'd thought it was a pain in the neck. But the reality of it turned out to be far worse.

Putting myself in danger was bad enough, but just by being near them, I put the people around me in danger too. Just like a mystery novel where the story doesn't work without someone near the detective dying, serious things kept happening around me one after the other. It was one thing in fiction, but actually having somebody like that in your life was a different matter entirely. Take Harissa, for example. Even though I once saved her, she was now hurt because of me.

...So was that it, then? If I wanted to avoid hurting anyone, would I have to keep moving? Never make any friends? Just solve stories wherever I went, only to leave behind the people I met along the way? Was that the destiny of a Namidare?

Even if it was only until I grew up, I was still just a kid. There was no way I could handle that. I'd always lived a perfectly normal life until this turned my world upside down. It was like a malignant tumor. I just couldn't accept it.

I wished it would go away.

This wasn't normal at all.

Just like Hibiki said, maybe I should let this bloodline go extinct...

As I got lost in my dark thoughts, I suddenly saw a glint of sunlight out of the corner of my eye. Was it a building? If it was a building, did that mean there were people? If there were people, did that mean... there was food?!

Hibiki seemed to notice it as well. The two of us looked at one another.

"...!"

And then we both broke into a run, without so much as bothering to nod at each other.

▽

What we reached seemed to be a forward base belonging to the white claymen. Fortunately, there was nobody around save for a few guards, and we were able to sneak in easily. We used our senses of smell, keen with hunger, to find their provision stores.

"I know it's too late to ask now, but is it really okay to eat this stuff?"

“Just be glad it wasn’t clay. Shut up and eat,” Hibiki said.

Good point. For now, I would put my stomach over my sense of ethics.

We finished by washing it down with some water. Finally, we were able to take a load off.

“Okay, first we need information. Let’s go, Rekka Namidare.”

“Go where?”

“If this is a clayman base, there should be an armory somewhere. We can find weapons to fight Kult Graphimore there.”

“Weapons, huh? But I don’t think we should use anything too serious...”

“Our goal is just to capture him. And from the look of what we saw on that battlefield, all the claymen have are primitive weapons like swords and bows. I’m actually worried we won’t find anything that can stand up to his Gatling guns...”

“It would be nice if we could talk with him before we fight,” I said.

“He plans to save his world by capturing me and putting me inside the Infinity Reviver. And he’s got more than enough firepower to do it, so there’s no reason for him to negotiate,” she replied.

“That’s true, I guess...”

“Of course, if we had something to offer him, that might change things.” Hibiki’s eyes narrowed, as if she was asking me a question.

Something Kult would want... that would be a way to save Kult’s story. If we had something like that, even Kult would hear us out.

“...”

But unfortunately, I still hadn’t come up with anything.

“Just so we’re clear,” Hibiki said, “my plan is strictly to get Kult to give up on the Infinity Reviver and move his people to another world. I think that’s the best way.”

“I know.”

“Rekka Namidare, if you want to solve this story in your own way, you need to come up with a solution by the next time you see Kult Graphimore.” Her voice was strict as she spoke.

After that, we used Kokomo’s transformation technique to turn into white claymen and left the food storehouse.

“...Hey, shouldn’t we try to hide more?”

“Who do you think is more suspicious: someone walking down the middle of the street, or somebody who’s hiding behind lampposts as they move? Kokomo’s spell made us look just like them, so walk like you’ve got nothing to hide.”

There was a lot of space between the buildings in the base, and there was very little cover on the roads. There was almost nowhere to hide. If anyone came around the corner, we’d be found immediately.

Fortunately, however, nobody had passed by us yet.

...But wait, why were there so few people here? The road was wide, and there were tracks that looked like they'd been made a jeep or something, but we were the only ones on it.

It was good for us... but it was still weird.

"Hey, Hibi..."

And just as I started to say something to her...

"What are you doing there?!"

"!!"

A sudden shout made us both freeze.

"Hey, don't tell me they found us out..." I muttered.

"Stay calm. Let's see what happens."

"Turn around!" the voice yelled from behind us as we whispered.

I turned around, but I was still frozen stiff with tension. As I expected, there was a helmet-wearing clayman standing there.

"The High Leader's speech has already begun! Get to the parade grounds now!"

His face was nothing but a mouth, with no eyes or nose, so it was hard to read his expression. But I could tell he was mad.

It didn't look like he'd figured out who we were... but how were we supposed to get through this? As I was freaking out, Hibiki gave a crisp salute.

"Sorry, sir! We were just deployed here yesterday and got lost!"

Wow. She lied without breaking a sweat!

"You're lost? You must've been slacking off during orientation, you maggot!"

"I'm terribly sorry! We're anxious to attend the High Leader's speech and would like to get there as soon as possible. I'm sure you're busy, but can you tell us the way to the parade grounds?"

"Hmph... Fine. Follow me," the clayman said.

He didn't look quite satisfied. But perhaps Hibiki's lie about wanting to hear the speech had paid off, because he motioned for us to follow him as he walked off. He got mad at us a bunch of times on the way, but at least he was none the wiser about who we were.

"...Comrades... We are... at..."

I could hear fragments of what must have been their leader's voice from the other side of a storehouse. Coming around the corner, I saw a giant field with over a thousand claymen standing in a row. The claymen all looked the same, with the exact same height and shape, so all of them standing in a neat line had an aesthetic quality to it. We joined in at the tail end.

"This is the High Leader's last speech before the final battle. Listen carefully," the white clayman said. He then left.

Once I saw that he was gone, I whispered into Hibiki's ear, "What

do we do, Hibiki?"

"We'll stand out if we move. They think we're soldiers, so once we're done with this speech we can just ask them where the armory is."

She was right. It wouldn't be strange at all for a soldier to want to go to the armory.

I nodded back at Hibiki. I decided it would be best just to quietly listen to this so-called High Leader's speech until this gathering was finished.

"Men, you have done well to endure this long war."

The High Leader was standing on a podium built from wooden boxes. His voice was piercingly loud. If I had been close up, it probably would've busted my eardrums.

"Those gilded bastards call us an inferior color, and attack us without cause! But their minds are tainted! They're worth less than the filthy mud on the ground!"

A rallying cry went down the line in response to his words.

"Hey..." I whispered to the white clayman in front of us.

"Hmm? What is it? Are you the guys who were late?"

"I have a question."

Hibiki was jabbing me in the ribs and whispering for me to shut my mouth. But I didn't stop. There was something I needed to know.

"He's talking about those gold dudes, right? Why are they fighting us?"

"Huh? Why are you asking this now? You heard the High Leader. Those damn goldies say we're an inferior color. They're trying to wipe us off the continent because of it."

"...By color, you mean the color of our skin?"

"Of course! They call us failures who can't even shine in the light of the sun! They make fun of us, those bastards!"

Can't shine? That's... That's really stupid.

Were they really fighting a war over something so dumb? Well, I guess the stupid ones were the gold claymen for attacking them over something like that.

The white clayman I was talking to seemed to remember something upsetting, because he angrily turned to face forward and started yelling along with the leader's speech. But eventually, just shouting wasn't enough for them. The white claymen all started stomping too. Over a thousand pairs of feet stomping hard against the ground literally made the earth shake.

"My brave, pure white soldiers! Are your shouts of anger true? Are you willing to do whatever it takes to teach them a lesson?"

The shaking of the earth grew even stronger.

"Very well. Then I will show you our army's ultimate weapon."

There was a loud rumble as the four walls of the storehouse next to the parade grounds collapsed outward.

Inside where the building had been standing was a huge wooden object. It looked something like a big box with things sticking out, but from a distance there was no way to tell what it was supposed to be. There were barely any decorations on it, but the sides were emblazoned with what looked like a relief in the shape of a dragon. For some reason, it reminded me of Lea when she was in Leviathan form.

A big box. And a dragon relief that looked like Leviathan.

That was all I could really see from where I was. Was this the High Leader's ultimate weapon?

"Its name is 'Eternal Death Before Defeat.' It is our ultimate weapon that will send them to hell. It's loaded with a perpetual motion machine that will create a huge explosion when it goes out of control!"

The soldiers all shouted in joy.

If it exploded when it went out of control, then it was basically a bomb, huh? I couldn't even imagine how big an explosion from a bomb that size would be. And its power source was...

"Hibiki. Do you think that thing's really got a perpetual motion machine in it? It all looks like it's made of wood to me."

“Well, it doesn’t exist anymore, but they say that years ago, a genius in Europe developed a perpetual motion machine using wheels. It was supposedly made almost entirely out of wood.”

“Which means it’s possible?”

“I don’t know... But I don’t think he’s lying.”

“Why? Maybe he’s just lying to inspire his troops. That’s possible, you know? Maybe they really need it.”

“Were you not listening to the name he gave it?”

“Um...”

Eternal... something or other, right? I remembered it was long and kind of goofy...

“!”

I gasped and looked at the weapon again. It couldn’t be...

“Death before defeat, right? Is there any point in lying if you’re planning to die too?”

I said nothing.

“And look carefully. There are a lot fewer claymen here than the number of gold ones we saw on the battlefield. I think it’s pretty clear that this war is just about over. And the gold claymen are trying to wipe out the white ones... In other words, surrender means death for them.”

There was no way to win and no way to survive. Their last recourse was to take their enemy with them in a huge explosion...

“My heroic comrades! If you can delay the enemy for just a little while longer, the engine loaded inside Eternal Death Before Defeat will reach critical mass and go out of control. It will wipe them out, along with the surrounding area. We will be guided to heaven by the engine and the dragon, who is a servant of God.”

“...You heard him. So what’s the plan, Rekka Namidare?” Hibiki asked.

“The plan?”

“We’ve got a few hours until the explosion. The white claymen will probably do everything they possibly can to buy time. As outsiders, we’re the only ones who can stop it...”

That’s right. We were the only ones who could stop it. The bearers of the Namidare and Banjo bloodlines were the saviors of stories that were headed for bad endings. Getting caught up in a situation where only we could save the day meant that we were already a part of the story.

The claymen’s story... This war.

Could we stop a war that was already underway? With just the two of us? How?

“What the hell do we do now...?”

My whisper was drowned out by the claymen shouting.

▽

We took to hiding inside an empty storehouse.

“……”

“……”

Hibiki and I were lying low in the shadow of a pile of crates, and neither of us said a word. The transformation spell had already worn off.

The war. And “Eternal Death Before Defeat.”

If we believed what the High Leader said, the engine was powerful enough to destroy both the white and gold claymen, as well as the land itself. I didn’t know what kind of perpetual motion machine it was loaded with, but supposedly this thing that could generate infinite energy was going to go berserk... Odds were good that he wasn’t bluffing, either.

If that happened, the claymen’s story would quickly reach a bad end. But what could we do? The white claymen were in bad enough shape that suicide seemed like a reasonable option. Unless we could stop the war, they were definitely going to use the engine.

No, just stopping the war wouldn’t be enough. The root cause of the conflict was apparently color discrimination. If we couldn’t get rid of that prejudice, the same thing would happen all over again even if we put an end to the war.

Was that... Was that something a mere high school kid could do? It was something only a few heroes throughout history had ever accomplished.

...Sure, I’d stopped a space war once. But that was because I’d managed to blackmail the enemy before the war even started. And I’d only been able to get the information I needed in order to do that because Satsuki was there to use the Magic of Omniscience.

I didn’t have any way to stop a war once it had begun. But if I didn’t stop it now, this story was heading for disaster.

One option would be to destroy the engine... No, if I did that and it blew up, we wouldn’t be any better off. I didn’t know anything about disarming bombs.

Iris had access to the latest in space technology. Would she know how to disarm it? Wait, even if I did dismantle Eternal Death Before Defeat, the gold claymen would still just kill all the white claymen.

If Satsuki used her magic to research the claymen’s history, would she be able to find some way to end the discrimination? What about asking Tetra to let the white claymen live in the artificial world in the Hall of Sealing?

...Come to think of it...

I recalled the dragon motif carved into the sides of the huge box. The High Leader had said something about the dragon being a messenger from heaven. Dragons were probably an object of worship for them.

And the dragon in the relief looked just like Leviathan.

"That's right..."

With her help, I might be able to stop the claymen. But even if I stopped the war, I didn't know if I'd be able to get rid of the prejudice that caused it in the first place.

"...Wait, what am I thinking?"

None of them were here now. Why was I even thinking about asking them for help? Moreover, I'd already decided not to involve any of them anymore.

I shook my head to shake off the weakness that was creeping into my thoughts.

"I'll deal with this. Somehow..."

I clenched my hands into fists as if trying to crush my weakness.

"Hibiki... Let's do this."

"Do what?"

"What else?" I stood up and pounded my fists on my chest, telling myself I had to fight through the fear. "We'll deal with all of this! Together!"

"What are you talking about?!" she yelled. Hibiki seemed like she was starting to worry. "Listen, we're already caught up in two messy stories! We can't handle any more... And we can't stop a war!"

"We're going to stop it anyway."

"We can't!" she screamed and shook her head stubbornly.

"Our bloodlines are the last hope for these stories. No matter how hard it gets, we shouldn't give up until the end."

"Yeah, that's the ideal! But I'm telling you to think about what we can realistically do! Get a grip!"

Yeah. She was probably saying the rational thing. But still... I, at least, didn't want to give up until the end.

"If you say you can't do it, I'll just do it myself."

I tried to show her how resolute I was, but...

"I won't let that happen!" she yelled back at me loudly.

"H-Hibiki?"

"Solve three stories at once...? The slightest bit of common sense would tell you how dangerous that is!"

"Well, sure, but... I don't have a choice. I can't abandon them."

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?!"

"I'm not... Well, I don't plan on dying, but I'm willing to take that risk."

The argument carried on, but for some reason, Hibiki looked like

she was starting to cry.

"Huh?"

I wasn't sure how to handle this unexpected reaction.

"...Are you planning on leaving me alone?"

"Huh?"

"You're the only person in this world I can be with now!" she yelled as tears started to roll down her cheeks. As soon as they fell, new tears came down to replace them.

"...What do you mean?"

"You don't understand? You idiot!" she yelled as she cried. "When I hurt my friend, I thought I couldn't be around anyone ever again. But once I learned what it was like to be with someone, I couldn't go back to being alone... That's why I came to you! Even somebody like me can be with you...!"

Hibiki had told me that she'd come to me in order to cut down on the total number of stories that we'd be caught up in. But that wasn't the real reason... Well, it was probably part of the reason, but she'd finally just admitted to the truth. She couldn't go back to being alone.

That's why she came to me? Because she had a "good" reason for being with me?

"How do you think I felt when I came to meet you?!"

Listening to her sob, I remembered the moment I'd decided to go with her.

"..."

What had I been thinking when I looked at her face then? Harissa had just collapsed. I'd realized that I was a threat to the people around me and decided to leave... but hadn't I felt better knowing that I wasn't alone? Hibiki was the same way.

"Hibiki... Do you not like the fact that I might die?"

"..."

She nodded.

"Then it's not that you want to give up on the story because you think it's impossible, right?"

Another nod.

"I see..."

I nodded back, now understanding what Hibiki was really thinking beneath her cool exterior. I wanted to save all the stories. So did she. She'd only said she didn't want me getting in over my head with these stories because it might get me killed.

That made things simple.

"I promise you."

"...?"

"I won't die."

I looked straight into Hibiki's tearful eyes and swore to her.

“No matter what, I promise you I won’t die! I won’t sacrifice myself and leave you behind! Maybe you shouldn’t rely on a normal kid like me, but if you want... I’ll turn into an invincible hero!”

I put as much heart into those words as I could and gave her every reassurance I could think of.

“Please! I won’t die! So don’t give up until the very end!”

Hibiki wasn’t really such an unfeeling person. If she were, how would she have been able to leave behind her only friend even when it tore her up inside? So...

“Hibiki, please, fight with me.”

“...”

Hibiki looked down hesitantly and blinked several times.

“...Just this once.” Her voice was hoarse. “Just this once, I’ll... fight with you till the end.”

“Really?!”

“Yeah. But if I think you might die, I’m gonna drag you out of there kicking and screaming if I have to.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I laughed at Hibiki’s joke.

She seemed to relax for a moment, but then her expression turned serious again.

“Listen. Keep your promise, okay? You’re the invincible hero of my story.”

“Got it.”

And so we made a promise to each other.

All right, it was time to do this. We were going to solve these stories together.

Intermission 3

It was long past midnight. In another hour or so, the sun would be up.

Satsuki was still trying to break the sleep spell on Harissa. She'd barely slept at all. Her feminine chest was heaving up and down. The long hours of spellcasting had sapped her strength. She'd only managed to keep up the spell through an incredible combination of concentration and mental fortitude.

And then...

"Cross over the boundary of light and darkness, and release thyself."

With a snap that only a mage could hear, the sleep spell on Harissa was finally broken.

"Whew..."

All the tension drained from her body at once, and Satsuki leaned back into her chair with a big sigh.

"Zzz... Zzz..."

Harissa was still sleeping, but it was a normal sleep. She would wake up soon.

"....."

Satsuki pondered what to do now. She'd only been able to concentrate like that because she was doing her best to avoid facing a certain truth. In order to avoid thinking about it, she'd stopped herself from thinking about everything. She focused exclusively on breaking the spell instead.

But now that was over. Which meant...

"Rekka..."

She was forced to stare down the reality of the situation.

"....."

With nothing left to stop her, all she could do was cry. The first stream of tears was quickly followed by another, and then another. She bit her lip hard and tried to suppress the noise in her throat.

"Waah... Waaahh...!"

Trying to hold back her sobbing, her nose and throat began to sting.

It was just then that Harissa's eyes opened a little. Satsuki hadn't been able to keep from weeping, and Harissa must have heard her.

"...Huh? Satsuki? Why are you crying?"

"No, it's nothing. Just..."

Satsuki quickly wiped her face with her hands and tried to come up with something to say. Harissa still seemed out of it. In a stupor, she watched on for a moment before suddenly sitting up in bed.

"Wait! Where's Sir Rekka? What happened to Sir Rekka? I was on the second floor when I heard a loud noise, and when I came down, there was a strange man..."

Harissa's eyes darted left and right as if she was trying to recall what happened next.

"Umm... umm..."

But she couldn't seem to remember. Harissa started to cry too.

"Rekka... He's not here."

"What?"

"He left you with me, and then ran off with that Hibiki girl."

Satsuki tried to speak as calmly and indifferently as possible to keep from crying again.

"Ran off...?!" Harissa repeated.

She then tried to leap out of the bed, but Satsuki grabbed her by the wrist.

"Wait, where are you going?"

"I'm going to save Sir Rekka, of course!"

Harissa had been asleep the whole time and had no idea what was going on, but there was no hesitation in her voice. She'd probably already guessed that Rekka was caught up in another story.

Satsuki was jealous of how she could just say, "I'm going to save him." But she had to tell her anyway. She had to tell her what he'd said.

"...Rekka said not to come."

"Not to come?"

"Yeah, he said he didn't want us following him..."

It was sad, but it was true. She had to tell her the truth.

"Sir Rekka said that?"

"Yes."

"He said that it would be a bother if I went after him?"

"Yes."

"What was the reason?"

"...I don't know."

Satsuki had barely been told anything, so there was no way for her to know. Rekka's words had been such a shock to her that she hadn't thought to ask.

"..."

Harissa frowned and looked down at her feet for a moment. But then...

"I'm going to help him anyway."

She raised her head and spoke clearly.

“Harissa, I know how you feel, but…”

“Sir Rekka saved me twice.” Harissa looked straight into Satsuki’s eyes. “Satsuki, I never told you what actually happened when he saved me, did I?”

“I heard something about defeating a Demon King with a laser gun, but not much more than that...”

“Rekka said he was going to fight the Demon King alone.”

“...!”

Satsuki was stunned for a second, but ultimately realized that that *did* sound like something her childhood friend might say.

“And I didn’t hear this until later, but Sir Rekka had no idea then that he could beat the Demon King with the laser gun. He said it was just luck that he was victorious, but I don’t think that’s right.”

Harissa’s cheeks were a little flushed. Maybe she was remembering what had happened. There was a strong light in her eyes.

“Sir Rekka asked me to send him home before he fought the Demon King. But when I told him what was going to happen to me, he said he’d fight the Demon King after all.”

If you just heard that part, you might think that Rekka Namidare was a wimp who’d done a complete one-eighty on a whim. A hero in a storybook or fantasy novel wouldn’t do that. They’d declare from the start that they were going to defeat the Demon King for the sake of the people and never deviate from that.

But Rekka Namidare was just a normal boy. The kind you could find anywhere. Satsuki knew that well.

“It wasn’t because he thought he could win, or because he was a hero,” Harissa continued.

“Rekka saved me because he wanted to save me. It wasn’t his world. It wasn’t his problem. He could’ve run away. And he stayed anyway, just for that reason. The reason he won, I think, is because that’s the kind of nice person he is.”

That’s why, Harissa said...

“He probably said he’d go alone as a kindness towards you and me. I think he’s willing to suffer as much as it takes for our sakes.”

“!”

Satsuki gasped at the words that came out of the younger girl’s mouth.

“And that’s why I can’t let him do it alone.”

Rekka had saved everyone because he wanted to save them. And now Harissa was going to save him because she wouldn’t let him do it alone. Sometimes saving someone meant doing something without considering their feelings. In fact, when Lea had rejected Rekka, he’d taken her hand and saved her anyway.

But even so... Even if they slapped your hand away and told you that having you around didn’t help... If you really wanted to save them, shouldn’t you do something? Even if that made them hate you...

...I want to save Rekka?

"You're right." The answer came quickly to Satsuki. "I can't leave him alone either."

That was how she really felt.

For one thing, would Rekka really have said something to hurt his childhood friend just because he thought she'd be a nuisance? Wasn't it more likely that it was a kind lie, just like Harissa had said?

There was no evidence either way. But Satsuki decided to believe —in her own feelings and in her childhood friend's kindness.

She'd always thought that it would be her job to comfort Rekka and take care of him if he ever had to face something terrible or suffer an unbearable burden. But maybe she hadn't considered what that really meant.

When she was little, she took in that stray kitten. And just a little while ago, Messiah had come after her.

Rekka had always been there for her.

And because of that, she thought it was mutual. Satsuki had convinced herself that when Rekka was in trouble, he would come to her and tell her about his problems and rely on her for help.

"How stupid," she laughed at herself.

If she wanted to help him, that wasn't the right way. She couldn't just wait for him to come tell her what was wrong. She had to go help him. Just like Rekka had saved Lea.

When Lea refused their help, he grabbed ahold of her hands and refused to let go.

Satsuki told herself that kind of resolve was what she needed now. Her tiny hands were far too frail to drag Rekka along, but she clenched them into fists with all her might just the same.

And if that still wasn't enough...

"Let's go, Harissa. All of us together."

"Huh? All of us?"

"Yes, all of us," she replied.

She was going after someone stupid enough to go off all on his own, leaving behind the childhood friend he'd known for years. To save somebody who didn't want to be saved, you needed incredible strength and even stronger words.

Especially in the case of her kind childhood friend.

Chapter 4: What Supports You When Hope Changes to Despair

I waited alone for Kult in the empty wastes some distance from the white clayman base. And sure enough, I eventually saw him flying high up in the sky.

“Ngh... You, huh?”

He was still flying in his Battle Kult Ship, but he stopped when he saw me.

“Where’s the girl?”

He looked across the empty plains. There was no grass to duck down in, and there were no rocks to crouch behind. There was nowhere for Hibiki to hide.

“Hibiki’s not here. She’s in that base over there.”

“I see. Then I don’t need to waste any time on you. Off I...” he began.

“Bad idea,” I said.

Kult froze.

“Why’s that?”

“Did you see the people of this world? They look like dolls made out of clay. Every one of them was identical, right?”

“Hmph. What about it?”

“You got confused when there were just two Hibikis on monster mountain, right? That was because I used a certain method to transform into her. Long story short, we have a way to change our appearances.”

Hearing that, Kult started to frown and then grimaced.

“There are close to a thousand claymen just in that base. Do you have a way to pick her out of a thousand others that look just like her?”

The dowsing pendulum would only tell him the general direction of what he was looking for. It would be impossible to find Hibiki among the claymen.

“So then why wait here for me when you’ve got a way to trick me? I might take you hostage if I need to.”

Kult’s eye narrowed behind his monocle.

“I want to make a deal,” I said.

“A deal?”

“There’s a perpetual motion machine in this world called ‘Eternal

Death Before Defeat.' If you're capable of modifying a hero's suit of armor to make the Infinity Reviver, you should be able to use this machine of theirs to invent something to stop the heat death of your world, right?"

A perpetual motion machine was a device designed to create energy forever, so I figured Kult would be able to do something with it.

"...Is that true?"

Just as I suspected, Kult was suspicious but took the bait.

"If you think I'm lying, use your crystal ball to see for yourself."

If "Eternal Death Before Defeat" was a real perpetual motion machine, it would be what Kult wanted. It should show up in his crystal ball.

Kult took out his crystal ball and chanted a spell.

"'Eternal Death Before Defeat' is a huge wooden box with a dragon motif?"

"Yeah, that's it," I nodded. "If you're willing to steal it, we'll help you. With our help, you can turn into a clayman and get close to it, for one thing."

"I see," he said. "And what do you want in return?"

"Glad to see you understand. We want two things. One is to wake up Harissa, the girl you put to sleep with one of your capsules. The other is to lend us the Infinity Reviver for a while."

With the perpetual motion machine, Kult could stop the imminent heat death of his world. And by stealing it, we could stop the claymen from destroying their world. Infinity Reviver was originally intended to turn one's Fate Ratio into power. We'd use it to fight the giant nine-tailed fox, and Kokomo could seal it once it was weakened.

That was the plan I'd come up with to solve all three stories. But if we couldn't get Kult on board, the whole plan was doomed.

He glared at me with stern eyes.

"I don't need to go through all the trouble of stealing the perpetual motion machine. I can just take you hostage. There's nothing in this deal for me."

Of course. That's how this was going to go down.

I wanted to save all three stories, but Kult was only interested in his own world. There was no point in him agreeing to help us.

But...

"There is," I said.

"Oh? And what's that?"

"You won't have to sacrifice Hibiki."

"...?"

Kult titled his head in confusion.

"You're not a bad person." I spoke with certainty. "You were upset

when you hit Harissa with the sleep capsule. You didn't mean to do it. That's what left you vulnerable then."

Without that opening, the bottle of spices I threw wouldn't have hit him.

"..."

Kult still said nothing.

He'd tried to sacrifice Hibiki because, at that point, there was no other way to save his world. He thought the Infinity Reviver was his last hope.

"If you've got a way to avoid sacrificing anyone, you should be willing to do what it takes," I continued. "We'll help you get the perpetual motion machine first. Once you've seen for sure that you can use it to save your world, you can lend us the Infinity Reviver. There's no risk for you."

After I said my piece, I fell silent.

Now it was up to Kult to make the decision.

Honestly, it was easier for him to use me as bait to catch Hibiki than to steal that huge engine. Even if he wasn't risking anything, it was still extra work. And all he'd get for his trouble was Hibiki's life. The life of a girl who had nothing to do with him at all.

Just looking objectively at what he had to lose versus what he stood to gain, this was a bad bet for him. I was just counting on Kult's conscience. But still, I decided to trust my intuition. Based on the tiny glimpses of what I'd seen, Kult wasn't a bad guy.

"...Very well."

And my trust paid off.

"I see... Thanks."

"Don't get the wrong idea. I just decided it was faster than chasing you around everywhere. If I can't get my hands on that perpetual motion machine, I'll be after you again."

"I know."

I asked Kult to wait while I went to the base to get Hibiki. Step one was a success. I'd convinced Kult, but that didn't mean we were out of the woods yet.

"Rekka, is it really okay to solve the stories like this?" R asked as she followed behind me. Her face was probably more expressionless than usual.

"..."

But I didn't have an answer for her.

▽

Kult fiddled with his ring to summon the blue door.

"First, I will make the preparations to steal the perpetual motion machine."

“Roger that.”

“Yeah.”

Hibiki and I nodded, and Kult reached for the blue door... or actually, for a small, red button on its side.

“Kult, what’s that button?”

“It’s a compressed memory button. It can recall the locations of the last three worlds visited. It will also return you to my lab.”

“Huh...”

So I guess the door had more functionality than just the dial on the knob. Well, that made sense. It would be a pain to have to mess with the dial each time he wanted to go to the same world.

Wait. Did that mean...?

“If you’d noticed that button, we could’ve gone right back to Earth,” Hibiki said, narrowing her eyes at me.

“...Sorry.” I bowed my head in embarrassment.

“All right, let’s go,” Kult said as he stepped through the door.

We followed suit. After the usual vertigo, I landed gloriously on the lab floor.

“Gwah!”

And by gloriously, I mean face first.

Why were the two of them looking at me like I was an idiot? And why was I the only one who couldn’t stick the landing?!

“You’re hopeless, huh, Rekka?” Even R was on my case about it.

...I was starting to think she might be right.

I stood up, feeling self-conscious.

“S-So, what preparations do we have to make?”

“Hmm, first I need to make the inventions I need in the workshop on the second floor, and then...”

BEEEEEP! BEEEEEP!

A loud noise echoed through the whole laboratory, drowning out Kult’s voice.

“Hey, what’s that sound?” Hibiki shouted as she covered her ears.

“The alarm from the first floor...?” Kult gasped and went pale. “Meifa!”

Kult yelled his lover’s name as he frantically ran to the capsule on the first floor where she slept.

Hibiki and I nodded at each other and followed after him again. I headed to the big room where I knew the sleeping pod was. Hibiki entered right behind me.

We both froze.

“Meifa! Meifa! Don’t die on me!”

Kult was in the middle of the room, clutching his sleeping lover in his arms. Looming over them was a demon perched atop the broken sleeping capsule.

“Heh. New guests.” The demon spoke more fluidly than I expected.

But despite his human speech, there was depravity in his smile. His mouth split his face from ear to ear, and I could see red gums and fangs inside. His lidless eyes shone with a red light. Rock-like horns grew out of either side of his head, and thick, armored skin covered his whole body. On his back were enormous, leathery wings.

I didn’t even need to ask. This was the guy who’d almost destroyed Kult’s world.

“The Demon Who Eats Darkness... Zolphiakd.”

“Oh? You’re not even from this world, and you know my name?”

“How did you know we’re from another world?!” I yelled.

“That is a trivial matter.” Zolphiakd’s lips curled up in a grin as he fiddled with something in his hand.

It was the pendant that Meifa had been wearing. The last time I saw it, the jewel was white, but now it was foggy and black with a big crack in it.

“Oh!”

I suddenly remembered how I’d seen a dark smoke swirling over Meifa’s chest while Hibiki and I were fighting here before. Grr... Even if Kult was on our case then, how could I have seen such an obvious sign and not even considered that possibility?

“It was quite the challenge, breaking this seal... But it was good entertainment, Kult Graphimore,” the demon said as he tossed the necklace to Kult’s feet.

The black jewel bounced off the floor and shattered.

“How... How did you break the seal?” Kult glared at the demon as he spoke.

“Simple. The mind of the woman you used as the vessel was linked with my own via dreams. I just used that connection to feed her nightmares.”

“Nightmares...?”

“Indeed. I devoured the darkness energy that was born of those nightmares and used that to destroy the seal.”

Kult had said that darkness energy was the source of misery and disaster, but apparently it could even be produced from dreams. So even negative emotions had a “darkness” to them that he could consume?

“Then you made Meifa suffer even as she slept?”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. Being sealed away diminished my power significantly. I simply took the darkness already within that girl’s heart and turned it into nightmares.”

“Meifa’s darkness...?”

“Do you really think that she became the sealing vessel and fell

into eternal sleep without the slightest bit of regret?"

"That's impossible... Meifa... Meifa chose to protect this world!"

"When humans wish to ignore what they don't want to see, they hide behind meaningless words like 'resolve.' There is darkness everywhere, which means despair and misery are always there, lurking under the surface. Mankind—the very world itself—is overshadowed with anguish. In the face of such overwhelming darkness, how does a hollow word like 'resolve' have any meaning at all?"

Kult went pale when he heard the demon's whisper.

"In her dream, she spoke endlessly of her hatred for you."

"N-No...!"

I could see the strength drain from Kult's body. His eyes, which had once shone with a strong desire to save the world, were now as bleak and empty as a dead fish's.

The demon saw this and laughed, and then turned to us.

"Now then, visitors from another world. Will you entertain me too?" Zolphiakd asked joyfully, the red light gleaming in his dark eyes.

"Tch...!"

Just seeing him look at me made my skin crawl. It was the same terror I'd felt when I stood against the Demon King and Bahamut. If I let my guard down, he'd crush me like an insect in an instant.

"Hibiki... Run to the Infinity Reviver."

The modified suit of hero's armor from another world, the Infinity Reviver, still stood in the corner of the room. If there was any way for us to survive this, it probably involved Hibiki getting inside of it.

"But what if he tries to stop us?"

"I'll distract him."

"But...!"

"There's no other way," I insisted.

Hibiki looked bitter.

"It's too dangerous! If you die..."

"I won't die. I promised, right?" I managed a smile for her. "Go!"

At my signal, we both broke into a run. I went for Zolphiakd, and Hibiki went for the Infinity Reviver.

"So you would fight me?" The demon laughed.

"Hyaaahh!" I forced myself to scream and formed a fist with all my might.

"Have you steeled yourself with your 'resolve' to die?" Zolphiakd grinned.

In that instant, a terrifying chill ran down my spine.

I could barely stand. My fist almost came undone. My body froze.

"...Gah!"

I forced my hand into a fist again. This was all I had. I clenched both hands hard now and screamed at my shaking knees. There was no way I could win, but I had to go forward.

Zolphiakd just stood there. Grinning. Unmoving. I forced all my strength into my arms and threw my fist at him.

"—!"

I missed.

"Heh. I told you. Even if you're willing to die, your petty resolve means nothing."

I heard that ominous whisper in my ears, then the cold terror I'd felt emanating from Zolphiakd disappeared. I fell forward and slammed headlong into the sleeping capsule. The shattered glass dug into my body, and I was instantly drenched in my own blood.

"Damn it!"

I ignored the blood and jumped up. But by that time, it was too late.

"Hibiki!"

She was in Zolphiakd's arms. She wasn't moving, but she looked unharmed. Evidently he'd just knocked her out, but...!

"This is what despair means, child."

"You bastard... Gwah!"

As I tried to run forward, there was a horrible pain in my thigh.

Damn it, the glass must've cut deeper than I'd thought! It was stuck in my leg. I reached down to pull it out, but...

I felt something unpleasant deep within my flesh.

"Gwaaahh! Aaah!"

A cold sensation shot up through the lower half of my body and welled up in my gut. It made me want to throw up. I yanked the glass shard out with a nasty noise, and blood started to flow freely from the gaping wound.

I couldn't... stand up!

"Look at yourself." Zolphiakd stared down at me from a position of absolute power. And then his gaze fell on Hibiki. "Hmph. I suppose she'll entertain me until I find my next game."

"Game? Entertain you?"

"Indeed. This whole world only exists to amuse me."

"You... You tried to destroy this world just for fun?!"

"That's a small matter... compared to the sin of boring me," he said in the same creepy whisper. "I certainly hope this girl can provide me some source of amusement. Once I'm bored of her, I'll just kill her."

"You asshole!" I screamed. But I still couldn't stand. "Damn it...!"

Was this the end?

"Heheh. Now then, I think it's time to go outside. I'm free now,

after all.” Zolphiakd cracked his knuckles as he spoke.

Instantly, he was shrouded in a massive explosion.

“What?”

There was a flash of black light as I was blown back.

“Gwah!”

After a few seconds of an odd floating sensation, my back hit the ground hard.

What just happened...?

For a moment, the shock blinded me, and it was difficult to hear anything. It sounded like something was collapsing far away.

“...Oh.”

The blackness finally started to recede from my vision. The first thing I saw was scorched grass.

My throat was hot. It hurt to breathe.

The wind on my skin told me that I’d been blown outside. I craned my neck to see that Kult’s lab was mostly destroyed. The building looked like it had been split in two from inside, and flames were rising out of it. Here and there I could see rubble on the ground.

“Gaah...”

Kult was lying right next to me, bleeding from his face. He must’ve tried to protect Meifa during the blast. His monocle was cracked, and half of the lens was missing. Even in his despair, he’d defended the woman he loved while I hadn’t been able to protect Hibiki, my partner, at all.

I bit my lip hard, feeling useless. The taste of a loser’s blood spread across my tongue.

Zolphiakd came waltzing out of the burning lab at a slow, leisurely pace. Hibiki was still in his arms, thankfully unhurt.

“Oh? What’s this?” Zolphiakd seemed confused when he saw the walls of light. “Hmm, I see. I thought something seemed strange. So this world is already doomed, then? How boring.”

His confusion didn’t last for long. As soon as he understood the state the world was in, he started to look around.

“Hmm? And what’s that?”

Zolphiakd gestured in the air with his fingers, and the red door slid over to him from the wreckage of the lab.

“Hmm... I can feel faint traces of otherworldly energy from beyond this door. It’s connected, then?”

He quickly realized what the red door was for. Since he was an energy-eating demon, maybe he was sensitive to subtle differences in energy? Come to think of it, he’d instantly been able to tell that Hibiki and I were from another world too.

He reached out for the red door, and I heard a crunching sound. The dial along with the doorknob were crushed in his hands.

Zolphiakd clicked his tongue in frustration and threw aside the damaged parts. He then tried pressing the recall button on the side of the door, but crushed that as well.

"Hmm... It's been so long since I've had a body that it's hard to control my strength," he whispered calmly.

Unexpectedly, however, the red door crackled with electricity. The air around it started to twist and bend. Three holes, something like wormholes, appeared in the distorted space. They converged over the door, and the door itself started to crack. The cracks became bigger and bigger until...

SNAP!

There was a sound like space itself was splitting, and the warped area around the door burst, rapidly covering everything in sight.

▽

At this point, I'd lost count of how many times today my body had gone through this weird sensation, but this time was the worst by far.

"Gwaaaaahh!"

It felt like a giant had grabbed my head and my feet, and was trying to wring my body out like a rag. There was no pain; it just felt like my insides were being shaken out. But the feeling didn't last long.

"Gaah!"

I hit the back of my head. Hard. Once again, I'd screwed up the landing.

I opened my eyes to find myself staring into a clear blue sky. I turned my head a little. I could still see the ruins of Kult's lab.

"Huh?"

I hadn't switched worlds after all? That was impossible. The sensation of passing through the door was so unique. I was sure that's what I'd felt.

What was going on?

I looked around and saw Kult nearby, lying on top of Meifa to shield her. At least he was safe. The Infinity Reviver was lying next to him too.

"Oh, right! Where's Hibiki?!"

...And where had Zolphiakd gone?

"Heh. Who are you looking for?"

"You—Gah!" I screamed.

I stood up, ignoring the burning pain in my back, and gritted my teeth as I looked up at the sky. Zolphiakd was flapping the wings on his back as he hovered in the air above me, still holding Hibiki. He was looking to the left and right.

"This is quite an interesting world, isn't it? Is that a skirmish going on over there? What curious creatures. And they're fighting over

there too... Hmm, the creatures of this world are all very different."

"...?"

What was he talking about? We hadn't gone anywhere. We were still at Kult's lab. I looked up at Zolphiakd and tried as hard as I could to figure out what he meant... and then I realized something was wrong.

A blue sky? That was impossible. Kult's world was covered with a dome of light. There was no way I could be seeing the sky.

And Kult's world was really tiny, so why could I see so far into the distance? Not to mention that the neat, green lawns and bushes suddenly cut off, disappearing into a barren wasteland. But then I heard what sounded like people yelling from beyond the wasteland...

"No way!"

I could see a flash of something on the horizon, like it was reflecting light... The claymen!

"Then are we in the claymen's world?"

Had Zolphiakd destroying the door moved Kult's whole world to the clayman world? Is that why there was grass in the wasteland? Just as the thought crossed my mind, I was interrupted by the sound of another explosion from the opposite direction.

"Now what?!"

I turned around and was astonished all over again.

There was a mountain. Of course, Kult's perfectly manicured garden world didn't have any mountains.

Then I could hear the familiar, creepy laughter of nuts. I could see pillars of flame and localized blizzards rising up from the tree line, as well as huge gouges out of the mountainside that looked like they were made by massive, invisible blades.

It was the Japanese monsters again, and I could see what they were fighting even from where I was standing. It was a huge beast—the crazed nine-tailed fox.

"Monster mountain's here too..."

There was no doubt about it.

"Three worlds have gathered into one?"

It was the only explanation.

No, wait. There was something I still hadn't considered, but it was because my mind was refusing to acknowledge the possibility. Because it... It just wasn't fair...

I'd left everyone to keep something like this from happening. So... why?!

"..."

I looked up at R, as if entrusting her with my last hope. I wished with all my heart that she'd deny it. But...

"Yeah, it's exactly what you're thinking, Rekka. It appears that the

door's recall function, well, malfunctioned. Now all three worlds have appeared on Earth." R's voice was as calm as ever.

She went on to explain a little more. I caught bits and pieces of things like "probably in the Pacific" and "the door was small, so it only took a portion of each world." But none of that mattered.

Compared to the despair before me, I...

"I..."

The nine-tailed fox was still on a rampage. The "Eternal Death Before Defeat" device was still threatening to blow up and destroy the world. And then there was Zolphiakd, the darkness-eating demon.

I'd brought all three of these calamities home to Earth.

"Why... Why did this happen?!" I screamed.

I wasn't even sure what I was feeling, but it was threatening to drive me crazy, so I just kept screaming. Maybe I was crying. Or maybe that was just the blood dripping from my forehead.

"I think it's time for me to go," Zolphiakd said coldly.

"W-Wait!" I yelled.

But the demon only laughed at me.

"I refuse. There are all kinds of spectacles around here to entertain me. I'm going to watch. You may do as you'd like, though I doubt you'll last long with those wounds."

With the blood in my eyes, I literally saw red as I watched Zolphiakd fly away.

"Damn it all...!"

I stretched out my hand as if to reach out and catch him, but before I could take two steps, the pain in my leg caused me to stumble to the ground. Blood was still pouring out.

My legs were getting heavier and colder...

Come to think of it, I read something in a manga once about an important artery in your thigh...

Was I... going to die...? Everything was slowly... going black...

"Rekka. Are you still alive?"

God, was she ever casual about it...

"I'm still alive... somehow..."

"Oh, glad to hear it," R said as she looked down at me.

"You need something?" I asked bitterly.

"Rekka, you're not going to run?"

"...You mean you want me to just give up on all this and run away?"

"No, I'm neutral. I'm just asking, you know?"

"Ugh..."

At least she was the same as ever.

But... what was she really saying? That I should run? After dragging three different potential cataclysms to Earth?

I didn't have anyone to help me this time. I was all alone and nearly dead.

Did she really think there was anything I could do now? Or that if there wasn't, I should just run? Yeah... That would be the normal thing to do, wouldn't it?

"Hell no... I'm not running."

But instead, the words that came out of my mouth were the exact opposite.

Even if running was, objectively, the common-sense thing to do, there was no way I was going to. That wasn't the kind of "normal" I wanted!

"I see. But the plan you came up with earlier didn't include saving Kokomo's mother or the white claymen, did it?"

"...!"

She had a point.

I'd only planned on sealing away the nine-tailed fox, and I had no way of ending the war or the discrimination against the white claymen. My plan was just an attempt to avoid the worst possible outcome.

That was my limit. It was all I could think of.

But it didn't matter now. I was at death's door, and Hibiki was gone. I wasn't going to be able to keep my promise to her after all.

Damn it all...

I couldn't move my legs. I could hardly even see. There was nothing I could do.

Nothing...

Not a thing...

I couldn't do anything on my own...

"Oh, looks like they made it in time," R suddenly whispered. "Hmph. I guess maybe it was worth buying time with that meaningless conversation. It would've been bad if you were unconscious by the time they got here."

What was she saying now?

I moved my head just a bit, and I could see a light through my closed eyelids... Dawn had long since broken on Earth, and the morning sun was climbing high into the sky.

Then I could sense what felt like someone landing right beside me.

"Rekka."

At first, I couldn't believe the voice saying my name was real.

"Huh?"

I looked up, but the blood and tears kept me from seeing what was right in front of me.

I did my best to wipe them away. When my vision started to clear, I saw Satsuki, Iris, Harissa, Tetra, and Lea... all standing there in the

sun.

"What are you doing here...?"

"Did you forget what kind of magic I have?"

She meant the great Magic of Omniscience, which let her search through all the information in the universe.

"It's the easiest thing in the world for me to find you," she said.

"Aww, Sir Rekka, yer all beat up! L-Lemme take a looksee!"

Harissa panicked and ran over to me, then quickly began casting a spell. A warm light came out of her staff and started to heal the wound on my leg.

"Harissa... you're okay?"

"Yes! Satsuki broke the spell on me!" she said happily.

"Satsuki did?"

I looked over at my childhood friend.

"That's right. If you'd come to me for help from the start, you never would've gotten hurt like this," Satsuki said, trying her best to look annoyed.

She was probably talking about how I'd left her behind to chase after Kult. Given the state I was in right now, I could see why she'd feel that way.

"Rekka, so what's going on here? Why are a bunch of identical people on white and gold teams fighting each other? There's all kinds of what look like space monsters fighting over there, too."

"Yeah. Satsuki told me to come, so I did, but what's going on here?"

Iris and Tsumiki both had the same question. On their way here, they must've seen all the carnage.

"...It's my fault," I said.

"What does that mean?" Tetra asked. I could hear her concern for me in her voice.

...I had to tell them.

"They're all stories I got caught up in... and I brought them all to Earth..."

I could hear someone gasp. I flinched, waiting to hear the words that would follow: *"What have you done?!"*

"...Is that why you disappeared on your own?" Lea asked in an unexpectedly gentle voice, although she looked a little sad as she spoke. "Remember what you said when you saved me? When you can't solve something on your own, it's only natural to go to someone else for help."

"Yeah... I did say that," I replied. "I know it's lame not to live up to my own words, but..."

I looked down, afraid to see how disappointed she must be in me.

"But... me getting caught up in stories like this is going to get all

of you hurt. The blood of the Namidare means there's nothing I can do about it... and it's not something that just stops if I beat the bad guy, like with Bahamut. So..."

"So you disappeared on us to try and protect us?" Satsuki cut me off and glared at me.

I nodded meekly, afraid of her piercing gaze.

"That's right... Like what happened to Harissa..."

"Harissa was fine. If you'd just talked to me before you ran off, there was an easy solution," she said.

"Th-That's right! I'm just fine!" Harissa said, waving both her hands at me as if to prove it.

"Rekka, do you think there's anybody in this world who doesn't cause trouble for other people? You're constantly involved with other people, so of course you're going to do the same."

"..."

I gradually started to understand what Satsuki was trying to say. Her words began to soak in to my wounded heart. But...

I stood up on my freshly healed legs and looked back at Satsuki as firmly as I could.

"You're ignoring the point. Somebody like me... Somebody who puts people in danger just by being around them doesn't have the right to be with anyone at all!"

I finally said what I'd really been thinking in the back of my mind this whole time. I shouldn't be allowed to be around other people. Especially not the people I love.

I wasn't some saint. I wanted to be rid of this stupid bloodline. I didn't think I could endure it... but I had to force myself to. Even if it destroyed me, I couldn't bear to see everyone else get hurt.

But Satsuki didn't look away, even when I screamed.

"I don't care. You probably came to that conclusion out of selflessness, didn't you? But you still haven't asked us the most important thing."

"The most important thing? What's that?" I asked.

"Let's say you do put us in danger just by being around us. Let's just say you invite disaster wherever you go... That still has nothing to do with whether or not we want to be with you."

"...!"

"Now come on. Ask us. Say 'I'm putting you all in danger. Will you stay with me anyway?'"

"....."

I just stood there.

I didn't even need to ask. When I looked at their faces, I could tell what kind of answer each of them would give me.

"Think about it. We knew you were caught up in something awful

again, and we came here anyway. We knew it was dangerous, but we still came to help you. Tsumiki even said yes before I told her what was going on."

"Y-You didn't have to tell him that!" Tsumiki yelled. Her face was bright red.

But Satsuki ignored her and kept staring at me. Her eyes made me waver. I didn't want to involve them... That's what I'd decided... But...

"Even with the bloodline of the Namidare, I'm still just a normal kid. The day might come when I really can't protect you."

"I don't care about hypotheticals," Satsuki cut me off. "Not even the Magic of Omniscience can tell me the future. The future is something we make together, Rekka. And we all want a future where we're with you. What about you?"

"I..."

What I wanted...? That was obvious. I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be with everybody.

That's what I wanted to say... but when I thought about what might happen, my voice got caught in my throat. Even if I made it through this one, what about the next one? And what about the one after that? Or the one after that?

As I stood there clenching my jaw, R did an aerial flip in front of me.

"You got yourself into this, you know..."

She was now floating upside down like when we first met.

"You can run from your bloodline and all, but that doesn't change the fact that you've saved them, right? Even when you grow up and lose the power of your bloodline, that's not gonna change how they feel, now is it?"

For a brief moment, I thought I saw the tiniest sliver of emotion in R's eyes. Was it... anger?

"Rekka, didn't you just say you weren't going to run? If you really meant that, then why are you running away from how they feel?"

Running away...? I hadn't left everyone because I wanted to keep them from getting hurt... I was just running away?

"Now, why not do what Satsuki suggested and ask them?"

Was I going to run away again rather than ask them if they would stay with me? Even though I wanted to be with them?

When everybody found out how dangerous I really was, they might scorn me. They might be disappointed in me. They might tell me to stay away from them... Was that really what I'd been running from? Had I pushed them away first so that they couldn't push me away?

"Rekka," Satsuki said with a serious look on her face.

"Rekka." Iris had a big smile on hers.

“Sir Rekka.” Harissa was holding her staff tightly to her chest.

“Rekka.” Tsumiki was glaring at me.

“Rekka.” Tetra was smiling.

“Rekka.” Lea gently smiled with her eyes.

But they were all looking at me.

“...You’re okay with that?”

I’m just a kid! I don’t have any power! I’m not a real hero! I might not always be able to save you! And I’m going to whine and complain along the way! Can you all accept that? Will you still stay by my side?

“It’s really okay for me to stay with all of you?”

“It is.”

The girls’ answer came back like it was the most natural thing in the world. I could feel a weight being lifted off my shoulders.

“Then...”

If everyone was going to stay by my side and protect me...

“I’ll become strong enough to protect you too!”

I balled my hands into fists again.

I was still scared. My hands and legs were still shaking. The fear of losing the things I cared about was still there. But if everyone was there to support me through my weakness...

I balled my fists up even tighter.

I was going to work for the best possible future—for me and for them. I wasn’t going to let my bloodline get the better of me. I would fight. For the sake of the people who were going to be with me. For the stories that needed my help. And right now, what I needed to fight for was...

“Hibiki...”

I looked up at the distant sky in the direction that Zolphiakd had taken her.

Hibiki Banjo, the girl with a bloodline just like mine... She was the reason that I’d left everyone behind in the first place, but now I was back together with them.

That meant Hibiki was alone again. That wasn’t okay. She was a normal kid, just like me. She needed someone by her side too. And if that was my job, then... world-ending weapons of mass destruction, insane monsters, wars, terrifying demons... I would defeat them all.

I looked around, taking in for a moment how much everything had changed. That’s when I saw the Infinity Reviver again.

“...!”

In an instant, everything clicked.

There were limits to the plan I had come up with on my own, but if everyone would help me, we could smash through those limits together.

The story of Kult and Meifa... The story of the nine-tailed foxes...

The story of the claymen... If we worked together, we could save them all!

“Please, everyone, help me!”

Chapter 5: And I Save, and Am Saved

I was over my worries.

I was weak. But everyone would compensate for my weakness. Where I lacked power, they would lend it to me. That was how I could save them all. I could protect everyone. I could resolve these stories.

That was the path I'd chosen. And the first step was the story of the magical scientist who'd gotten me into all this.

"Hey, Kult!"

"Meifa... Meifa... Hmm? Oh..."

Kult looked up from his sleeping lover in a daze. He looked like he'd aged ten years in just a few minutes.

"Snap out of it! I need your help."

"Hmph... What can I do now? Just leave me be." Kult weakly cradled Meifa's body. "I couldn't save anything. Not the world, not even the heart of the woman I love..."

"You mean the nightmares Zolphiakd was talking about? He was making that crap up."

"How can you be sure? If he was lying, then how was he able to revive?" Kult asked.

If Zolphiakd had managed to break the seal and revive, that meant he'd gotten his hands on darkness energy somehow. Since he was linked to Meifa, it seemed like the only place he could have gotten it was from her. In other words, her nightmares.

There were tears in Kult's eyes.

"I never should have gotten her involved. I never should have told her that she was the only one who could seal away Zolphiakd. She was so kind... When she heard that, she must have felt like she had no choice... I took advantage of her kindness and forced her to endure this horrible suffering. No amount of atonement will make up for this..."

"Then..." I grabbed Kult by the collar of his white lab coat. "You'll just have to do what you can!"

"Wh-What?'

"Only a coward would give up before he even tries, right?"

"But if Meifa wakes up and sees this disaster, she'll blame herself," he said.

"Yeah," I replied.

Meifa had sacrificed herself to save her world. That was the kind of person she was. If she saw that Zolphiakd had revived, she'd surely

blame herself.

"I know. That's why we're going to fix all this before she wakes up."

"Is that possible?" Kult's eyes widened.

"To do it, I need your help."

"..."

"Listen, maybe she did regret choosing to sleep for eternity, and maybe she did have nightmares. But that doesn't mean she blamed you, does it?"

"What do you mean?"

It was true that Zolphiakd was back. That probably meant that she was having nightmares in her long sleep, but it didn't mean that the nightmares were what the demon said they were.

"Anybody would feel bad after having to say goodbye forever to the person they love, right?"

I'd never had a girlfriend, so maybe it wasn't my place to talk, but that was beside the point.

"It hurt you too, didn't it? So believe in her. Believe that she felt the same thing you did. And this time, why don't you try for it?"

"Try for what?"

"What else?" I gave him the brightest smile I could muster. "A happy ending where everyone is smiling."

▽

I was on Lea's back like a dragon-riding knight. Since she'd lost most of her power, she was now small enough that I could wrap my legs around her torso. Together, we were flying above the clayman battlefield.

I'd borrowed Kult's dowsing pendulum and was using it to look for Zolphiakd. He made it sound like he was going to watch the fight, which meant that he was probably hovering somewhere around here, looking down on the claymen and laughing as they spilled each other's blood...

"Rekka, I found him," Lea said to me telepathically. She could see much farther than a human could.

"Okay, we'll launch a surprise attack from above..."

"No, he's already noticed us too," she said.

"All right... then charge in!"

"Understood!"

Lea accelerated. The wind whipped around us as we surged forward. No normal human could withstand this kind of acceleration or this kind of wind. That is, unless they were protected.

I was wearing a hero's armor, the Infinity Reviver. Kult had removed his modification to turn the wearer's Fate Ratio into energy,

and had restored the armor's original function: converting one's Fate Ratio into pure combat power.

Kult's crystal ball had told him that Hibiki's bloodline made her the perfect person to power it... but my fate was just as crazy as hers!

In fact, my whole body felt like it was overflowing with power. Despite wearing heavy armor, my body felt light and limber.

I looked down at my clenched fist and saw a burning red aura. With this kind of power, I should be able to fight even a darkness-eating demon.

“Rekka, he’s throwing something!”

Lea’s telepathic message got my attention. I looked up and scanned the horizon. Zolphiakd was still just a dot in the distance to my human eyes, but I thought I could make out him raising the arm that wasn’t holding Hibiki. His hand emitted a malignant aura that instantly formed into a spear of pure darkness.

“Dodge!”

I reflexively ducked. Of course, Lea dodged too, but the spear passed right over my head.

“He’s fast. And what’s more...”

I felt the unease in Lea’s voice and looked behind us. The spear I’d just dodged had circled back around and was headed straight for us again.

“It looks like he can control them too!”

Lea rolled to dodge the spear that threatened to impale her from behind. But yet again, the spear turned and came right back at us.

“Lea, let me handle this.”

“Are you sure? You haven’t tested how much that armor actually enhances your power yet, right?”

“I’ve gotta fight him either way. This is as good a chance as any to figure it out.”

I glared at Zolphiakd, who was now close enough to see clearly. The spear was just a distraction. If I couldn’t handle it, there was no way I could beat a demon.

“All right. I’ll try and dodge close enough for you to reach,” Lea said. She understood exactly what I was getting at.

This time, the spear of darkness came down on us from above like a meteor. I looked right up at it and steeled myself.

Hero’s armor... No, “Infinity Reviver.” Lend me your power. Draw out my own.

The instant we crossed paths with the falling spear, I threw my gauntleted fist out and smashed the spear’s edge. The red aura and the dark aura intermingled, but it was only for an instant.

With a noise like a tree splitting from a lightning strike, the spear shattered and vanished. It was made from energy rather than physical matter, so there was nothing left of it.

I could see Zolphiakd’s lips curl into a grin.

“Okay! We can do this!”

With Lea's speed, I'd be close enough to hit him in only a few more seconds. But just when I was ready to punch that smirk right off his face...

Spears appeared one after the other from both of his hands. Almost instantly, there were more than thirty of them. Dodging or knocking down that many would be no easy task. Maybe this was the end of the road for me.

But more importantly...

"Hibiki!"

When Zolphiakd raised his other arm and let go of her, Hibiki started to fall to the ground.

That bastard! He threw Hibiki away as soon he found a new toy to play with. Damn it!

"Lea!"

"Right!"

Lea instantly went into a steep dive. We were faster than the gravity pulling Hibiki's body downward, but the flock of black spears was still chasing after us.

"Don't be afraid! Just focus on catching her!" Lea yelled.

"...!"

Her words kept me from turning around.

She was right. Lea would dodge the spears for me. My job was...

I watched Hibiki as she fell. Suddenly, her eyes opened. The roar and pressure of the wind must've woken her up.

"Ugh, ah... Kyaaaaah!" She screamed when she realized she was falling.

"Hibiki!"

"R-Rekka Namidare?"

She seemed confused when she heard my voice. Maybe she didn't recognize me in the armor I was wearing.

I clenched my legs tightly around Lea's torso and let go of the ring I'd been using as reins so that I could reach out with both arms. Hibiki must've understood because she reached out for me too.

"I'll kill you if you touch me anywhere weird!"

"Is now really the time to worry about that?!" I yelled back.

The instant Lea caught up to her, I grabbed on to Hibiki.

Lea pulled out of her dive, zig-zagging her way through the spears.

I put Hibiki behind me to protect her from the wind. With my armor, I could block it from reaching her.

"Hang on tight!" I yelled.

She cooperated and wrapped her arms around me tightly. With her holding on to me, I was able to use my hands again.

The red aura gathered around my fists once more as I struck at the

black spears.

"Don't fall off!" Lea warned me as she began to rapidly climb.

The spears turned around, hoping to impale us from below.

I clung to Lea and tried to support both my weight and Hibiki's with just my legs. If I relaxed even a little, we'd both fall straight off. This was harder than I expected!

Damn it! Come on, Infinity Reviver! Give me more power! I swore I'd give everyone a happy ending!

"I won't let it end here!"

As I screamed, my whole body pulsated with red light. I felt a great power surging through me. My legs, which had been on the verge of slipping off, held fast to Lea's torso and I could see the aura around my hands get stronger.

For some reason, I felt like I could really do this. I relaxed my fist and moved all five of my fingers. Just like I'd hoped, red lights gathered at my fingertips. I looked around and counted the remaining spears.

"Go!"

The red bullets of light that burst forth from my hand were faster, more agile, and more precise than the spears. My five bullets easily destroyed the twenty spears or more that were left.

"Nice work, Rekka."

"No..."

Lea was impressed, but I didn't know why I'd suddenly powered up. In the heat of the moment... what had I been thinking?

"Rekka, were you able to save Hibiki?" Satsuki asked through Lea's powers.

"Yeah, she's fine. You stay with Kult."

"Roger."

After telepathically confirming things with Satsuki, I turned my mind back towards Lea.

"Lea, follow the plan."

"Right," she responded. Her horned head nodded at the front of her long torso.

Then we took off for Kult, but of course, Zolphiakd followed.

"Hey, where are you going? Entertain me more!"

Compared to a moment ago, his voice was clearly more excited. He was like a berserker who'd found a new rival. Zolphiakd chortled with glee as he threw spear after spear. His attacks did feel more like he was playing than seriously fighting.

"Lea, connect me telepathically to Hibiki and the others."

I kept knocking the spears away as I prepared to move to the next stage of the plan.

"All right, you're connected," she said.

“Thanks. Can you dodge the spears behind us for a while?”

“It looks like our foe is just toying with us. I’ll be fine.”

“Understood.”

I put Lea in charge of handling Zolphiakd for the moment, and focused my mind on Hibiki and Kokomo.

“Hibiki, Kokomo, can you hear me?”

“Wh-What the heck? I suddenly heard a voice...”

“Rekka Namidare, is that you?” Hibiki asked.

“Telepathically, yes. Listen to me, both of you.”

I explained the plan quickly, including what I needed them to do.

“Can you do it?”

“...I can do it. But what about you, Rekka Namidare?”

“Me?”

“Are you willing to involve the people you care about in a story like this?”

Of course that was what she’d be concerned about.

“Everyone says they’re willing to help.”

“But...”

“And it looks like I don’t have the right to refuse them, either.” She probably couldn’t hear it through the telepathy, but I was laughing to myself inside my armor. “They all said they wanted to be with me, Namidare or not.”

“...”

“So, Hibiki... Once this is all done, let’s go see your friend in the hospital.”

“Huh?”

“You were good friends, right? You should at least talk to her so you can tell her how you really feel and find out how she really feels too.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

Huh? Did I just feel six cold stares? Was that even possible with telepathy?

“Um, anyway, if you’re worried about it, I’ll go with you.”

“But...”

I could hear the hesitation even in her thoughts.

Just like how Satsuki and the other girls had decided to stay with me even when they knew about my bloodline, maybe her friend would feel the same way. I could tell that that was what she was

thinking, but it seemed like she couldn't bring herself to say it.

"It'll be fine! Believe in your friend."

I gave her a little push.

"She's very shy. She won't be able to talk comfortably if you're there."

"I see..."

"...But you can still go with me to the hospital?"

What was with that question mark?

Well, whatever. Of course I'd go with her.

"So what about you, Kokomo? Can you do it?"

"I..."

Hibiki's arms held on tightly to the Infinity Reviver, but I knew it was probably Kokomo's doing.

"I... I can't do it."

"You can't, huh?" I asked.

"I'm a coward! I can't even use magic right! But now I've gotta fight that scary demon? I..."

"I'll get scared and run away again! I know it!"

The last part didn't come telepathically. It was a pained scream.

"Even if your helping us meant we didn't have to seal away your mother, and we could save her instead?"

This time I was sure I could save everyone. But in order to do it, I was going to need everyone's help.

"I want to save her! But I can't do it!"

Kokomo was refusing, but I could feel that he really did want to save his mom. He was still a kid. And a wimp. So I could understand why he wanted to run away. But...

"Kokomo, if you want to try being courageous, now's the time."

"But I'm not strong, so I don't have the courage."

"That's where you're wrong," I cut him off. "You need courage because you're a wimpy kid."

"...Huh?"

"If you're strong, you don't need courage. When you're strong, you can do whatever you need to by yourself. But the weak are different. You're weak, so there are a lot of things you can't do. And because of that, you lose out a lot. You can end up losing things that are precious to you. That's how it is for me, really."

"For you too, Rekka?"

"Yeah. Most of it you can probably put up with if you make the right excuses. You might be able to forget about something once you've lost it. You might even be able to pretend you never had it in the first place... but the day will come when you just can't do that anymore."

You know, like... right now, for instance.

“You know how weak you are, but someday there’ll be a reason you can’t give up! So you grit your teeth, and hang in there for all you’re worth! You ball your shaking hands into fists! You stand tall on your shaking legs! You have to fight, even if it means facing someone stronger than you! And that’s when you have to wring out every last drop of courage from the depths of your heart!”

“I… I…”

“Strength doesn’t mean courage. Courage is what the weak have when they need to be strong.”

I turned around and raised the visor of the Infinity Reviver’s helmet. I looked straight into Hibiki’s eyes, into Kokomo’s mind.

“Kokomo, I’ll say it again. If you want to be courageous, now’s the time!”

“I…” Kokomo spoke using Hibiki’s mouth.

There was still weakness in his voice. But that just meant I had to support him. Then he’d be able to find his courage. Because…

“Kokomo, don’t let them beat you.”

“I…”

“Fight.”

“I…”

“Say it! Tell them!”

“I…”

Because I knew how Kokomo really felt right from the start.

▽

I dropped Hibiki off with Kult and the others, then flew with Lea to monster mountain. I was going to face off with Zolphiakd where we could look down on the battle below.

“You’re not going to run anymore?” he asked.

“Nope.”

It would make it easier for Kult to do his part if I pulled Zolphiakd away from the fighting claymen. And here, if something happened, I could deal with it.

“Then entertain me some more!”

“!”

Zolphiakd suddenly charged at me.

His thick, hard skin worked like natural armor… and a weapon. His deadly fist flew right at me.

“Tch!”

I just barely managed to block his punch with both arms, but I lost my balance and almost fell off of Lea.

“What’s wrong? There’s lots more fun to be had!”

Three more punches from both fists followed. My ears were ringing from the impact.

“Damn it!”

I gathered the red aura in my right hand again and let it fly.

“Not happening!”

Zolphiakd easily dodged the red bullet, then summoned a spear of darkness to knock it out of the sky.

“Tch! But my bullets were stronger than the ones before!”

“Fool. All I had to do was increase the energy in the spears.”

“You make it sound so damn simple...”

“Come on, is that all you’ve got? You still haven’t entertained me!” he yelled.

“Why, you...!”

“Here I come!”

This time, Zolphiakd charged with his spear.

“Gyaaaoh!” Lea roared as she flicked her body to dodge the spear.

“You won’t dodge my attack so easily!” Zolphiakd shouted.

The spear’s tip began to grow. So he could freely manipulate things made of darkness energy like that?

“Watch out!”

I knocked the spear away with my gauntlet, but his black spear was more powerful than my red aura now. Punching at it chipped away at the Infinity Reviver’s gauntlets. I still didn’t have enough power to defeat him! From there on out it was all I could do to defend, and I started to get more and more worried.

If I wanted to save everyone, I needed a way to defeat this darkness-eating demon and his ability to infinitely absorb energy... But I’d just gotten the hint I needed. Something had been changed when I’d become able to fire those bullets of red light. If I could figure out what that was, I could probably draw out even more of the Infinity Reviver’s power.

Think. Don’t stop thinking. Don’t give up. You’re just an ordinary human! It’s the least you can do!

“Ggyaaahhooohhh!”

And then I heard a roar from far below. It was the victory cry of the nine-tailed fox. The other monsters had lost their ability to contain her, and were summarily defeated.

“Oh no!”

I took a quick look down at the mountain, and then back up above. I’d put “them” in charge of buying time if the nine-tailed fox won before Kult was ready. But I didn’t see them yet.

“Lea! We’ll back the monsters up! Head for the mountain!”

“I’ll do my best!”

Lea answered me, but she didn’t sound as confident as I would’ve hoped. While we were speaking telepathically, I was still fighting off Zolphiakd. Since I couldn’t fly, Lea was keeping up with his incredible

speed for me.

Gradually she descended lower and lower, until we were low enough to see the fox's tails... But it didn't look like I'd be able to get down there and help!

"Grrraaoooh!"

The nine-tailed fox roared again and began to float up into the air.

Oh crap... It could fly too?

That worried me even more. And then a huge shadow passed overhead. Not a moment later, a silver spaceship slammed straight into the nine-tailed fox.

"Iris, you made it!"

"Yup! It just took a little longer than I thought to get ready. But talk about timing, huh? Tell me how perfect that was!"

I could hear Iris's cheerful voice through Lea's telepathy.

If anybody besides Lea or Kult could fight the nine-tailed fox, it was Iris with her super high-tech spaceship.

"I-Iris, if you're going to slam into it, at least tell me first!"

I could hear Harissa's voice from aboard the ship too. She sounded like she was going to cry. I assumed they were wearing seatbelts, but still, this was more like a traffic accident than anything else.

"Grrrrrr!"

The nine-tailed fox raged at its new and mysterious enemy.

"Oh, tough little thing, aren't you? Too bad I loaded this baby up with enough armor to crash straight through an asteroid belt."

"Grrr!"

The fox tried to leap at its foe, but...

"Uwah! Ealim Nekram!"

Harissa's invisibility magic made the ship disappear.

"Grrr?"

The fox looked around, but of course, it couldn't find them. And then, the now invisible ship slammed into it again.

"Gwaah!"

The angry fox's eyes went blood red as it formed whirlwinds and pillars of flame all around it.

"Iris, Harissa, get out of there if things get dangerous!"

"Everything'll be just fine! Leave it to me!"

"I-I'm okay, too! Be careful, Sir Rekka!" Harissa added.

We ended our telepathic communication as we each turned to face our opponents.

"Hmph."

For some reason, Zolphiakd's attacks were slowing down.

"You've been distracted. Don't you realize that you should be playing with me and me alone?"

"...I'm not doing this for you," I said.

“What?”

Zolphiakd and I glared at each other. But Kult suddenly interrupted before things could escalate further.

“Can you hear me? We’re ready.”

“You’re done already? That was fast.”

“Indeed. Tetra was a splendid assistant.”

“Rekka! Are you okay?” a female voice cut in.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Good work, Tetra. Kult, get started.”

“Certainly. I’ll have it done within ten minutes.”

Ten more minutes.

Kult would make it happen. I was sure. He was a genius who’d already saved a world once.

Then it would just be up to me to do my job. And what’s more... I was getting really tired of this asshole.

“Zolphiakd, you sure you’re not mistaken about something?”

“Me? Mistaken?”

“How many people do you think are involved in the stories you play with for fun?”

I squeezed both my hands into fists.

“How much do you think the stories you destroy mean to the people who are part of them?”

A red aura burst forth around my hands. It was hot, and it shone with its own light. It burned like real fire, as if in response to my anger.

“This isn’t some game. These stories are people’s lives.”

I’m not letting you destroy them.

I’m not letting that happen.

The only place I wanted to see sad, emotional stories was in fiction. What reality needed were hopeful stories with happy endings, no matter how unrealistic they might seem. And if the blood within me made that possible...

“In the name of the Namidare family, I’m going to save them all!”

No more running.

When this story began, I ran away from everybody. I told myself it was because I didn’t want to hurt them, but it was actually because I was afraid they would reject me. I tried to make it so I couldn’t be a part of anyone’s life at all. But that was impossible.

And so now I was going to stop hiding from the truth. I couldn’t stop being me. That was obvious. That was normal. I should’ve known that.

The important part was realizing who I was, and then making a decision: what did I want to do about it?

If only I could save a story, then I would save it. If the stories put the people around me in danger, I’d save them too. If everyone would

help me, even when I was weak, I would use their support to help protect them too.

That was my decision. And when I said those words aloud...

"!"

As if in response, the red aura expanded around my fists and burned all the way up to my shoulders.

"Save them all? You think you can do that when I have the power to destroy everything? You just try!" Zolphiakd cried, his voice cold and hollow.

As if making good on his threat, he formed dozens of spears with a wave of his hand. I could feel that the power in these was far stronger than the ones from before.

"..."

But they didn't seem like a danger to me now.

I crossed my arms in front of my chest, and then pulled them back like I was drawing two giant bowstrings. When the spears started to move, I released the power building up in my arms. Crescent blades made from the red aura rocketed forward, striking down the spears.

"What?!"

I could hear the shock in Zolphiakd's voice as I opened and closed my fists to see how it felt. The red aura had gotten stronger again... which meant that I was starting to draw out the power of the Infinity Reviver. But what was the key to doing that?

"You interest me... But it's too early to get cocky!" Zolphiakd sounded happy.

But then something weird happened.

Black particles rose up from the ground and started to gather beneath him. The black particles—they must have been darkness energy—were coming from the claymen's battleground and monster mountain.

"Hahaha! This place is filled with energy to feed me. That mad beast and the war between those humanoid things are producing lots of powerful darkness." Zolphiakd laughed and created dark spears in both hands. "Now entertain me more!"

We clashed with each other harder than before. The red and black auras collided, exploding like fireworks.

We could both manipulate our weapons however we wanted, so there were sometimes blades, sometimes bullets, and sometimes other types of weapons as we slashed, stabbed, punched, and fired at each other.

Zolphiakd and I seemed almost equal in strength. That just meant he was still enjoying himself. But...

"Gyaoh!"

"Lea! Are you okay?"

“Tch... Sorry. He’s getting too fast for me!”

Lea couldn’t keep up with us. I was fighting, but leaving all of the moving and maneuvering to her. That was becoming a fatal flaw. The white dragon was covered in wounds, and I had cuts on my sides and legs too.

“Lea, don’t try to force yourself to keep up with him!”

“But...!”

“I’ll protect you! Don’t try to dodge! Just slam me into him!”

“Got it!”

I was her shield. I focused on following his movements and blocking his attacks. I was especially careful to block anything going for Lea.

“What’s wrong? You’re having trouble keeping up!”

“You think so, huh?!”

The Infinity Reviver’s glowing red gauntlet and Zolphiakd’s fist shrouded in a dark aura collided.

Zolphiakd didn’t move his fist. He just leaned in and moved his face closer to mine.

“My power is still getting stronger. At this rate, you’re eventually going to die.”

“Thanks for the warning... but don’t worry about me.”

“What?!”

“My plan’s working just fine. That ‘eventually’ is never going to come.”

I deliberately laughed.

The next thing I knew, I felt the unique sensation of telepathy in my brain.

“It’s me, Kult. We’re all ready here!”

“Huh? Can you hear me? Um... It’s me, Tsumiki! I made what you asked for and gave it to Otomo!”

“Roger!” I yelled aloud as I sent the same message telepathically.

“Now it’s time for my counterattack!”

I pushed myself away from Zolphiakd. When I put some distance between us, the telepathic channel opened again.

“Rekka! Lea! I’m teleporting what Tsumiki made to the sky above you with my magic! Make sure you grab it!”

Lea and I looked up as we heard Satsuki’s voice. Several dozen meters above us, there was a large, black object—the dark matter that Tsumiki had cooked from the laughing nuts on monster mountain.

“Diediediediediedie!”

They were telling something to die...

Those things had been creepy before, but at least their laughter was cheerful. What the hell did Tsumiki do to them? Well, that didn’t matter now.

“Gyaooh!”

Lea grabbed the dark matter in her maw and swallowed it down. Instantly the wounds on her body healed, and she began to grow. She still wasn’t back to her full strength, but where she’d been the size of a large shark before, she was now the size of a steel transmission tower. As the power flowed through her, something that looked like a floating pair of golden headphones appeared around her head.

“Mmm... Tsumiki’s cooking is always the best.”

“Really?”

I still couldn’t believe it, but Lea loved that stuff. It was also the most efficient way for her to get her power back.

“Let’s go, Rekka!”

“Right!”

Lea’s body snaked back and forth as she charged at Zolphiakd. His dark spears tried to pierce her flesh, but spears of water sprung from the golden headphones and knocked them away. And that wasn’t all. A waterspout seemingly appeared out of nowhere and threatened to suck him in.

“What’s going on?!”

Zolphiakd seemed a little frightened by our sudden power-up, and he formed his black aura into a small blade to cut through the waterspout. In the momentary opening that created, Lea rammed him.

“Gwah!”

Struck by something several hundred times his mass, Zolphiakd groaned in pain. Now that the tide of battle was turning in her favor, Lea continued the onslaught using both her body and her water magic. But she was still up against a demon with the power to destroy worlds. Even if he was on the defensive now, he didn’t seem to have taken damage from anything except the initial impact. He was still deflecting her attacks.

As the battle carried on, we found ourselves back near the fighting claymen. The last time we were here, we’d been high up in the sky, but now we were close enough to the ground that I could see their bare clay faces.

“Heh. Are you sure it’s a good idea to bring me close to a battlefield? The hatred and sorrow created by war is the perfect energy source for me.” Zolphiakd laughed at my apparent slip-up.

“Hah! Just try it!” But I laughed at him too.

The demon seemed uncertain.

“What do you mean?”

“Look down!”

“?”

As he did, his uncertainty became shock.

Just like before, thousands of claymen were below us, crowded

together. But the yelling had stopped, and they all had lowered their weapons.

"How?! It's too soon for the battle to be over! The dark energy of hate and sorrow can't have disappeared this quickly!"

"They lost their reason to fight."

"Impossible! You can't stop a war that easily!"

"Then do you know why they were fighting in the first place?"

"..."

"If you don't know, then I'll tell you. It was over the color of their skin. They were fighting because they were different colors."

"The color of their skin?!"

Zolphiakd looked down again. All the claymen below had turned white. Despite their huge advantage in numbers, there was not a single gold clayman to be seen now.

The trick was Kokomo's transformation magic and Kult's instant sorcery capsules. First I'd had Kokomo use his transformation magic to turn into a white clayman. Then I'd had Kult replicate that magic with his instant sorcery capsules and use the Battle Kult Ship to scatter them on the battlefield. Now all the claymen were the same color.

And without a reason to fight, the battle was over.

"Rekka, I've connected telepathically to all the claymen."

"Thanks, Lea. Give them a really loud howl."

"Indeed."

"GWYAAAOOOOOOOOOOH!"

Lea's extra loud roar echoed from one end of the massive battlefield to the other. The claymen, who were still uncertain how to handle this sudden development, all looked up at the sky. They saw Lea—or rather, Leviathan, who looked just like the dragon god they worshipped—and they all fell silent.

"Do you hear my words?" I spoke directly into the minds of the claymen.

Of course, I was met with many surprised thoughts. But since I couldn't answer each question individually, I got right to the point.

"Heed me well! God has seen you fighting over the color of your skin, and is deeply grieved! She has changed all of your skin to white so that this war may never happen again!"

To the claymen, this had to have come out of nowhere. But the transformation magic was permanent unless Kokomo broke it, and they were now convinced that Lea and I were messengers of their god. In other words, they probably had no choice but to believe me.

"The real enemy lies elsewhere!" I kept going. "Behold! The demon in front of you is your true foe! He lurked among you, building up your hatred for those of a different color, and drove you to fight! Now that the power of god has driven that hate from your hearts, the

demon has no choice but to manifest himself! Now ready your weapons against the real enemy! Join me and defeat the demon!"

I had no idea how I'd been able to come up with that lie. But part of the plan was to give them a concrete enemy to fight instead of taking things out on each other.

"We joined with messengers of god to defeat the demon called discrimination." If I could make them believe that, surely it would end their discrimination for good.

The claymen let out a rallying cry as their archers let fly a barrage of arrows at Zolphiakd. The soldiers without bows started throwing stones.

"Wh-What's going on?!"

Zolphiakd was surprised at this sudden turn of events. He brushed away the arrows in annoyance.

"Now, Lea!"

Lea roared as we rushed Zolphiakd once more.

"Hmph. I'm not falling for that again."

Zolphiakd soared over her head to evade her. His intent was probably to dodge with the minimum amount of effort necessary, and then strike at her exposed torso as she passed under him. But I'd already planned for that!

I ran up Lea's long torso to get closer to him. With my speed enhanced by the Infinity Reviver, I closed the distance to Zolphiakd in only a few seconds.

"!"

Since we'd only fought in the air so far, Zolphiakd had no idea how fast I could run. His surprise slowed his reaction time just enough. I summoned all the red aura into my clenched fist that I could, and slammed it right into the face of the so-called "Demon Who Eats Darkness."

"Gwaah!"

Listening to his ugly scream, I thought about his body shattering as I channeled more of the Infinity Reviver's power. The red light expanded and burst.

"GYAAAAAH!"

His screams grew louder.

The red light traveled through Zolphiakd's body and erupted from within him, cracking his stony skin from the inside.

Now!

I leaped on top of Zolphiakd's badly damaged body and grabbed his bat-like wings to keep him from flying away.

"Graah! Let go of me!"

"Ever gone bungee jumping with no bungee?" I asked him.

I'd done something similar once.

As we fell, I could see the claymen scattering below where it looked like we would hit the ground. Next thing I knew, there was a loud sound and a massive impact that rattled me in my armor.

"Owww..."

Without the Infinity Reviver, I would've died instantly.

"You little insect...!"

A few meters away, Zolphiakd was climbing to his feet. He'd hit the ground just as hard as I had. His armored skin was cracked here and there, and his bat wings were broken in several places.

I could still see him gathering darkness energy, but it was visibly less than before. The war of hatred and prejudice was over, and now all the claymen were fighting for one goal—to defeat the demon. Zolphiakd was probably drawing strength from their aggression, but even that was a lot less pure than the energy there'd been just a few moments ago.

They were fighting for hope now, not despair.

"Lea, I'll handle the rest myself! Get back!" I yelled towards the sky.

She gave me a quick telepathic response and flew off. She'd gone to prepare for the final step.

"You think you've won...?"

Zolphiakd seemed to interpret my sending Lea away as humiliation.

"What if I do?"

Zolphiakd fell silent.

Even if his ability to absorb darkness energy was infinite, there was a limit to how much darkness energy there was around him. Energy was spread throughout the entire universe. He couldn't absorb all of it at once.

If he had that capability, he would have used it to destroy Kult's world instantly. But if they were able to seal him away, they must've gotten the upper hand while he was taking the time to collect more energy from farther away.

In a long, drawn-out battle, Zolphiakd was probably invincible. But in this instant, I was far more powerful than he was.

"You..."

...lose, I started to say, but then the battle shifted to a new phase.

"Grrraaooo!"

A white beast fell from the sky and landed between us. Well, it wasn't entirely white—it had nine golden tails.

"Grrrrrrrr!"

It had probably fallen here while it was fighting Iris and Harissa in their invisible spaceship. The nine-tailed fox looked at me and Zolphiakd with bloodshot eyes, trying to figure out what to do.

“Hahahaha... HAHAHAHAHAHA!”

I could hear the demon laughing on the other side of the great fox.

“At the very last moment, luck is on my side!”

Zolphiakd leaped up onto the huge beast in a flash and plunged his fingers into its hide.

“Gugyihh!”

There was a spurt of blood as the animal screamed. And then a black aura poured out of its body and into Zolphiakd. It was the poisonous ki—a dangerous type of ki responsible for plagues and disasters—that had driven the nine-tailed fox mad. In other words, the fox was filled with high-density darkness energy. And Zolphiakd was absorbing all of it.

Just like Lea had eaten Tsumiki’s dark matter to restore her wounds, Zolphiakd was consuming the poison ki to instantly heal himself.

“Grruh...”

Now drained, the great fox flailed its tails about weakly and slumped to the ground.

“Delicious,” Zolphiakd said.

“!”

The dark spear he flung impaled my shoulder.

“Gaaah!”

My aura was supposed to protect me up to my shoulders. Had he pierced through it...? The energy he’d just absorbed from the nine-tailed fox seemed to make him more powerful than ever.

“So this is the climax, huh?”

My defeat here would mean the end of all the stories. I couldn’t lose. And to win, I needed more power!

The Infinity Reviver had powered up twice so far. That wasn’t a coincidence. There had to be a clear reason why. I remembered both times it had happened—when I grabbed Hibiki as she fell, and when I’d fought Zolphiakd above monster mountain.

“...”

...Damn it! What was the trick?!

“All right. This is your last chance to entertain me. And once you’ve done that... Die.”

Zolphiakd’s next spear made a beeline for my chest.

“Tch!”

It was fast. And powerful. The tip pierced my defenses and dug into my skin.

“Hahaha!”

Zolphiakd snapped his fingers, and the earth underneath me exploded like a landmine. I was blown into the air like a rocket before crashing back into the ground and rolling a ways.

I groaned in pain and quickly stood up. He was faster and stronger than I was. I needed to think. My one hope of victory was to keep thinking.

I tried coming at things from another perspective. For example, why had Kult's crystal chosen Hibiki, not me, to wear the Infinity Reviver? The Namidare and Banjo bloodlines were the same. The only difference was the sex they affected. The Infinity Reviver had the ability to turn someone's Fate Ratio into pure power. A Fate Ratio was supposed to be "the weight of a person's fate," so why Hibiki and not me? Thinking about that, and the last two times the armor powered up...

What was the difference between me and Hibiki? What decided the weight of someone's fate?

"I suppose it's time to end this."

Zolphiakd poured more energy into his dark spears. Newer, sharper blades shot out from the hilt like branches from a tree. And with a crackle, jaws of black lightning sprang from around him and came at me from all directions.

If all of those things hit me, I was gonna end up like a pincushion... wasn't I? It was a stupid thing to think about at a time like this, but I laughed a little.

"Die!"

Zolphiakd cackled madly as he hurled his spears. The spears all moved at once, and together with the black lightning they flew at me like a snake ready to devour its prey.

There was no way I could block them all with just my arms. But...

"Rekka! Everyone's in position!" Lea called to me telepathically.

"Roger," I answered—and plowed into Zolphiakd head-on.

The burning red aura collided with the black lightning and exploded. The flames and lightning were canceling each other out. Then the spears came to pierce me through the chest.

"Graah!"

I grabbed two of them. But they were made from his energy, and he could change their form however he wanted. The other spears closed in on me to impale me... But the red flames burst from my shoulders to cover my whole body. The spears shattered before they could even touch me.

"What?!"

"—!"

Assured of his victory, Zolphiakd had let down his guard, and I was able to able to instantly close the distance now. I was right on top of him in a split second. Zolphiakd quickly moved to regain his balance.

"Nwaaaaahh!"

“Aaaaah!”

Our fists crossed paths as both of us hit each other in the face.

“Nwah!”

“Gah!”

Zolphiakd staggered, and the visor on the Infinity Reviver shattered. But instead of flinching, I threw my next punch.

“Damn you!”

Zolphiakd grabbed my fist and hit me back. This time, I grabbed his fist. We were locked in a grappling match now as we pushed against one another.

“How? How can a mere human draw out such power?!”

“Because I realized... I realized how to use this armor’s potential! What determines the weight of your fate... is the burden that you carry.”

Both Hibiki and I had been running from our bloodlines, but she’d known about hers since she was little. She’d spent years training to deal with it. The crystal ball had sensed her resolve.

That meant that I needed resolve too. I would carry the burden of lineage. I would carry my own burdens. But that wasn’t enough.

I wasn’t alone. I would carry the weight of the stories of everyone I’d met in all my sixteen years, and everyone I would meet in the future. That would be my life as long as I was Rekka Namidare.

“I may not be as good as a real hero who fights the Demon King for the sake of everyone, though!”

I was born an average kid. Normal. But I had my own fate to carry. It was easy to curse a fate that felt too heavy to bear. But it was wrong to curse the fact that you were born.

Once you’re born into this world, it’s all you can do to live as best you can. And if you’re going to live for all you’re worth, then celebrate the fate that brought you into this world! That’s the trick to living a happy, normal life.

“I was born to be me, no matter what that means! And that’s how I’m going to live! And to do that, I’ll fight whoever I have to!”

“Hah! But what can you do? We’re evenly matched right now, but I am still slowly absorbing darkness energy. Eventually, I will win.”

“Idiot. You’re still only looking at me?”

A white ray of light sliced across the ground. One, then two, then three... Six lights in total gathered, forming a pattern around us. And when that pattern was complete, Zolphiakd began to sink into the ground like he was being pushed down by an invisible giant.

“Ngaah! Wh-What is this?”

“You probably wouldn’t know, huh? I hear it’s called sealing magic.”

Sealing magic was a way of getting rid of poisonous ki. If it would

work on the nine-tailed fox after absorbing too much of the stuff, of course it would work just as well on Zolphiakd after he did!

When Lea had said “in position,” this is what she’d been talking about. Satsuki, Iris, Harissa, Tsumiki, Tetra, Lea... Each heroine stood at a point of the star, forming a giant hexagram on the ground. It was a huge, inescapable trap.

To seal the star, I gathered the fragments of Meifa’s sealing pendant that Zolphiakd had destroyed. It had turned a misty black, but I’d gotten Kokomo to use his magic to purify it. Then I gave one piece to each heroine.

“How...?! If you had this magic, why didn’t you use it before?”

That was a good question. The answer was that if I’d used it when he’d landed, he wouldn’t have absorbed the darkness energy from the nine-tailed fox first.

“Maybe my goal was to get you to draw out the poison ki from that nine-tailed fox.”

When the fox interrupted us, it was my plan was to lure Zolphiakd towards it. But the demon was confused. He had no idea why I’d want to do something like that.

“What does that mean?!”

“I told you. I’m not fighting alone.”

That’s right! There was also someone fighting to save his mother, who’d been driven mad by the poisonous ki.

“Kokomo! Hibiki! Now!”

“Don’t tell the enemy, you idiot!” Hibiki, who’d been approaching Zolphiakd from behind, yelled at me as she leaped off the ground.

There was no hesitation in her eyes. The fox ears on her head were even poking straight up like they were standing tall in the face of fear.

“Gwah! Let me go...!”

“Hell no, idiot. We win.”

I think I grinned the biggest smile I ever had in my life.

A white light like a flame gathered in Hibiki’s hand. She touched Zolphiakd with it from behind, and Kokomo recited the sealing incantation in Hibiki’s voice. The hexagram on the ground started to shine.

Epilogue

The mysterious continent that appeared in the Pacific was big news for a while, but Kult set up a barrier similar to the one he'd used in his world to make sure that nobody could get in to do a detailed investigation. I asked Lea to keep an eye on the claymen. And at the nine-tailed fox's orders, the other monsters agreed not to leave the mountain and scare people.

Several days later when I went back to check on things, Kult was ready to say goodbye.

"The repairs on the world door are finally complete. I had to make some substantial modifications to get these three worlds back to their original places, though."

"But you were able to do it anyway. You're amazing, Kult."

We both laughed as we stood inside the partially rebuilt lab.

"All right, then can I leave the claymen to you?"

"Indeed. Just leave them in my care. The monsters say they'll help too, so I'm sure I'll be able to come up with some kind of magical science that will keep their children from having different colors."

These claymen were only the same color because of Kokomo's transformation spell. But the claymen that weren't teleported to Earth, as well as any children they had, would still be colored differently. That's why I'd asked Kult to take care of things.

"It feels kind of lame to leave the last steps to someone else, but thanks for helping."

"Don't let it bother you. Thanks to you, they were glad to give us their perpetual motion machine."

"Well, that's thanks to Lea, not me."

They were absolutely convinced Lea was a messenger of their god, and would do most anything she said. Besides, they didn't need their "Eternal Death Before Defeat" weapon anymore. Kult had taken the perpetual motion machine out of it and had already developed it into a machine to save his home world from heat death.

"I need to hurry and save my world too. I hate to say it, but tonight I'll be sending each world back to where it belongs, and then we'll be going back home."

He turned to his lover, Meifa.

"……"

The now-awakened sleeping beauty smiled gently and bowed. Kult said she couldn't talk because she'd been asleep for so long that

she'd forgotten how. But she would surely remember soon with Kult's help.

"Yeah... This time, make sure you make her happy."

Then I said farewell to him too.

▽

Unfortunately, I'd only communicated with the claymen through Lea, so I couldn't say goodbye to them. In fact, if they'd found out I'd raided their food stores, they probably would have hauled me before a military tribunal, so I decided to skip the goodbye altogether. All I could do was wish them a peaceful future without war.

▽

And so my next destination was monster mountain.

"Rekka!"

A small fox—No, a young boy of about five or six saw me and came running. It was Kokomo, who could now transform into a human.

"Hey, Kokomo. How've you been?"

"I've been great!"

"Good to hear. How's your mom?"

"She's still sleeping, but they say she'll be just fine soon!"

I could tell from the cheer in his voice that things were probably going to be okay.

"You know, you really sound different as a human," I said.

"Do I?"

"You sure do."

He wasn't as panicky as before, for one thing.

"Um... That's because of you, Rekka."

"Huh?"

"..."

No, wait a second. Why was he blushing?

Kokomo was a boy, right? I mean, it's hard to tell whether a little kid is a boy or a girl sometimes... but he *was* a boy, right?

"W-Well, once you get back to your own world, stay healthy. Both you and your mom."

"Right!" He nodded with a brilliant smile on his face.

"..."

Part of the reason he couldn't really use his magic, I'd heard, was that he was still very immature. But Kokomo could now transform into a human, which was a more complex spell than just transforming into a copy of something, because he'd grown mentally. If he could use his spells like this now, he'd probably be fine... but I decided to ask anyway.

"Listen, Kokomo."

"What is it?"

"If you ever have to fight against a really scary enemy again, what will you do?"

"I know exactly what I'll do. I'll grit my teeth and fight them with everything I have."

I smiled in relief—or maybe it was just a normal smile—when I heard how quickly he answered. I hadn't been that worried to begin with.

"I see. Okay, well, maybe we'll see each other again someday. Of course, that might mean you got caught up in another weird story."

"That doesn't bother me at all!" Kokomo said, looking kind of sad. "I hope we do meet again someday."

"Yeah. See you around."

And so I finished my bittersweet goodbyes with all the characters from this round of stories. That night, Kult's blue door sent all three worlds back home.

▽

The next weekend...

I was waiting for Hibiki outside a room at a university hospital in the next school district over.

"..."

Her friend had woken up from her coma. I'd gotten the news two days ago. And just like I promised, I came with her to the hospital.

Hibiki had almost given up and gone home several times on the way here. Each time, I pushed her forward until she finally went inside her friend's hospital room. That was almost an hour ago...

"Yeah. See you soon."

But now the door opened from the inside and Hibiki came out. She glanced my way and walked right past me. I followed without

really saying anything.

"..."

"..."

We walked silently down the hallway for a while, then down the stairs, past the front desk, and out of the building.

Only then did I finally ask, "How'd it go?"

"Well... She says I can come see her again."

"I see."

I hadn't done anything rude like listen in on their conversation, so I didn't actually know what had happened. But looking at Hibiki's face now, the answer was obvious.

"Even someone like me... can have friends, huh?" Hibiki whispered to herself reverently. "Hey, why do you think that is?"

"Only she knows that," I said. "But... her desire to be friends with you probably far outweighed any concern she had about you being dangerous, right?"

"...Is that a roundabout way of complimenting yourself for all the girls in your life?"

"I didn't mean it that way!"

That was absolutely not what I meant!

"I think you could let it all go to your head a little more, Rekka. Particularly if that drives you to hook up with one of the heroines..."

Shut up, R.

As always, she was floating in the air around me. Deciding to confront my lineage head-on instead of running eventually included facing her future and the "War of All." Maybe it was time to start taking what she said seriously...

"Doesn't every man want a harem of his own?"

...Or maybe not.

I sighed and scratched my head as I walked with Hibiki to the station. She lived nearby, so it was where we would part ways.

"All right, I'll see you later," I said.

"R-Right."

"Call me again if you ever need help," I said as I waved and headed into the station.

"W-Wait!" Hibiki grabbed me by the sleeve.

"H-Huh? What is it?" I staggered a little and turned around.

"L-Listen..." Hibiki was unusually mumbly. "Th-Thanks! ...For today, I mean. For coming."

"What, is that all?"

I guess she just wanted to thank me for going with her to the hospital. But I'd promised her I would. It wasn't that big of a deal. Even so, she didn't seem like she was done yet, because she didn't let go of me.

“Can I... come to your place once in a while?” she asked, looking up into my eyes.

“Yeah, sure. We’re basically relatives, so come over whenever you want.”

“I see... Yeah, you’re right.”

“Is that all? I think my train’s coming soon.”

“O-Oh, and...! And...!”

I guess she still wasn’t done...

“R-R-R-Re...”

“Re what?”

She was trying to say something but was tripping over her words. Her face was getting redder and redder. Was she embarrassed because she was having trouble talking right? Before long, her face was as red as a ripe tomato, but then she closed her eyes tight and took a deep breath.

“Re-Re-Re-Rekka!”

She said my first name.

“Yeah, um...” I almost asked her what she wanted, but then I realized something. “Huh? Didn’t you say you were too embarrassed to call boys by their first names...?”

“—!”

A moment later, it felt like a bomb exploded in my gut.

“You really are an idiot!” she yelled, and then ran off.

That little... She really didn’t have to punch me in the stomach.

“You haven’t grown up at all, huh?”

R looked down at me and sighed as per her usual.

▽

I spent the weekend feeling like someone had jammed a heavy rock in my stomach.

But come Monday, my kitchen table was loaded with the breakfast that Satsuki had made for me. There was rice, kimchi, natto, root vegetable soup, and then spinach salad. The soup was leftover from the Otomo household's dinner last night.

"Let's eat!"

"Dig in."

Satsuki, Harissa, and I sat around the table, talking about nothing in particular.

Harissa finished eating first. She got up and put on her apron as she went into the kitchen. Since Satsuki had made breakfast, it was Harissa's turn to make lunch. It sounded like a lot of extra effort to have two people making separate meals, but they had worked this out, so I wasn't going to say anything. The last time I did, I got my cheek pinched for my trouble.

After breakfast was over, I got ready for school.

"Rekka, you'll be late if you don't hurry."

I could hear Satsuki's voice from the front hall. It wasn't that late, but she'd known me long enough to know that I would take my sweet time without any motivation.

"Yeah, I'm coming."

"Here you go, Sir Rekka."

"Thanks, Harissa."

I took the lunch Harissa prepared for me and put on my shoes in the front hall.

"Did you forget anything?"

"Of course not."

Satsuki really was naggy, but she opened the front door for us. And outside, I saw a scene I knew quite well.

It was time for school.

These stories, the bloodline of the Namidare, even going to school... Once I decided to accept them, they became a part of what was normal for me.

"Okay, we'll see you later."

"Bye!"

Harissa watched us go as we headed out the front door.

—Fin—

Afterword

This is the third volume of the romantic comedy that's currently trying to win the world record for "most worlds saved." Hello again to those of you who've been reading since Volume 2. And to all of you who bought all three at once, it's nice to meet you.

This series began in June, and I've managed to put three books out before the end of the year. This is all thanks to you readers who support me.

We met a new heroine in this volume. She's a little different than the ones we've seen before... and that's what Volume 3 is about. Rekka faces a bigger challenge than ever before.

By the way, for the covers for the first two volumes of *Little Apocalypse,* Rekka is surrounded by heroines with a "what have I gotten myself into?" face that might make you a bit jealous. This time, he's covered in wounds and looks like a total mess... but he's also got a bright smile on his face. If you want to find out what happened to him, please read the story.

Come to think of it, when Volume 2 came out, I went with my editor and a salesperson to visit some bookstores. When an author visits a bookstore, he goes to introduce himself and promote his work. All the bookstore employees I spoke with were great people, and some of them were really strong supporters of *Little Apocalypse.* It was really encouraging.

Also, I signed a bunch of books. Thanks to those of you who found them and picked them up. My hand hurt when I was signing them since the title's so long, but I'd love to get another chance to do it again! (He said, looking at the editor and the sales department.)

Lately, I've really wanted to get a cat.

I had two of them at home when I was a kid, but I am catless now. I'd love to have another one. I mean, I'd like to have one around, not just as a pet. I'd love to have it sleep next to me on my futon. Or maybe hop up on my keyboard when I'm writing so I can't work.

But yeah, I love cats. I have a lot of cat stories. I've had a soft spot for them ever since I was a kid. Even before I started elementary school, I just loved cats more than anything. But I was allergic to them.

"Huh? Isn't that a problem?" you ask.

Yes. That would normally be the end of any talk of cats, but being a cat lover just seems to be in my DNA...

As a kid, I would play with them and pet them. I did it even though I had allergies. I pet those cats more than anyone's ever pet cats before. If I saw a stray, I'd chase after it and cry when I couldn't catch it. Whenever I went to the house of a friend who had a cat, I'd pet it. My face would get all red and swollen, but I didn't care. Man, I really do love cats.

And then one day, a stray cat came into my house. I don't know if it was hungry or if it was running away from somebody, but just when I was closing the door, it zoomed in at an incredible speed. And then it started rubbing up against my legs and meowing. Of course, I was overjoyed. I began to pet it and pet it and pet it and pet it and... Huh? My eyes didn't hurt.

Evidently that was the end of my cat allergies.

Maybe touching so many cats had helped me develop antibodies or something. I don't know. I never went to a hospital to get it checked out. But after that day, I could hang around cats all I wanted. And so the story had a happy ending. Well, anyway, I might be moving next year, so I'd like to find a place that lets you keep pets.

Oh, and also, Hobby Japan's webcomic site, Comic Dangan, will be running a *Little Apocalypse* manga. By the time you're reading this book, I think they should be up to chapter 2, maybe? It's another *Little Apocalypse* story, this time by Koji Hasegawa, so please check it out.

Lastly, my acknowledgments and thanks. I thought that since there was only one heroine this time, the character design would be less work... But in the end, it turned out to be the same number of pages as always. And so once again, a big thank you to Nao Watanuki, who always works so hard on the character and item designs. Thank you so much. When I saw the second illustration at the start, I said to myself, "That's it! Volume 3 is as good as done!"

And thanks again to my editor, Nanbu, who I always cause so much trouble for. This time was the first time I got the "is the draft ready yet?" call, and it terrified me. V-Volume 4 will be ready on schedule! I promise!

And thanks to everyone at HJ Paperback's editing and sales department who worked so hard. Thanks to the designers who always get the title design done, despite its ridiculous length... Thanks to the bookstores that put this book on their shelves. Thank you all very much.

And lastly, thanks to all of the readers who picked up this book. I can only write *Little Apocalypse* because of you. Thank you all so very, very much. I hope you'll continue reading.

And I hope to see you in Volume 4!

I'm the artist for the insert pictures, Nao Watanuki.

Once again, I've been given the chance to speak with you all.

Sorry for this slightly creepy afterword page. For Volume 3, here's the rough image for Zolphiakd! When I heard about spears that poked holes in people, this was the image I came up with. Not very creative, huh? Kult and Hibiki had very detailed character descriptions and it was fun to imagine what they might look like. I'm just a bit sad that I couldn't show my design for Kult's capsule, which had a beard symbol on it. Oh, also I think Hibiki looks really good in her school uniform. What do you think, Nameko...!

Thanks for reading my terrible handwriting.

I'd like nothing more than to get a chance to see you again!

Thanks to both Nameko and the editing department!

-Nao Watanuki

✡挿絵担当・和狸ナオと申します。
今回もお邪魔させて頂きました。よろしくお願いします。

ちょっと不気味なあとがき頁で失礼します。
3巻ラフ紹介はゾルフィアクド！レンコンにする槍
ときいて初めはこんな形状で描いてしまいました。安直ですね。
設定の多いカルト＆響はイメージするのも楽しく。今回のお気に入り。
カルトの『ひげ丸印』カプセル等出せなかったのがほんの少〜し残念でした。
あと。響の制服はセーラーが似合うと思うのですが
どうでしょうか。なめこ先生…！

乱文・乱筆にお付き合い下さり
ありがとうございました。
またお会いできましたらこの上ない幸いです！
なめこ先生、編集様方もお疲れ様です。
ありがとうございました。

和狸ナオ拝。

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I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse: Volume 3
by Namekojirushi

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Edited by Megan Denton

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